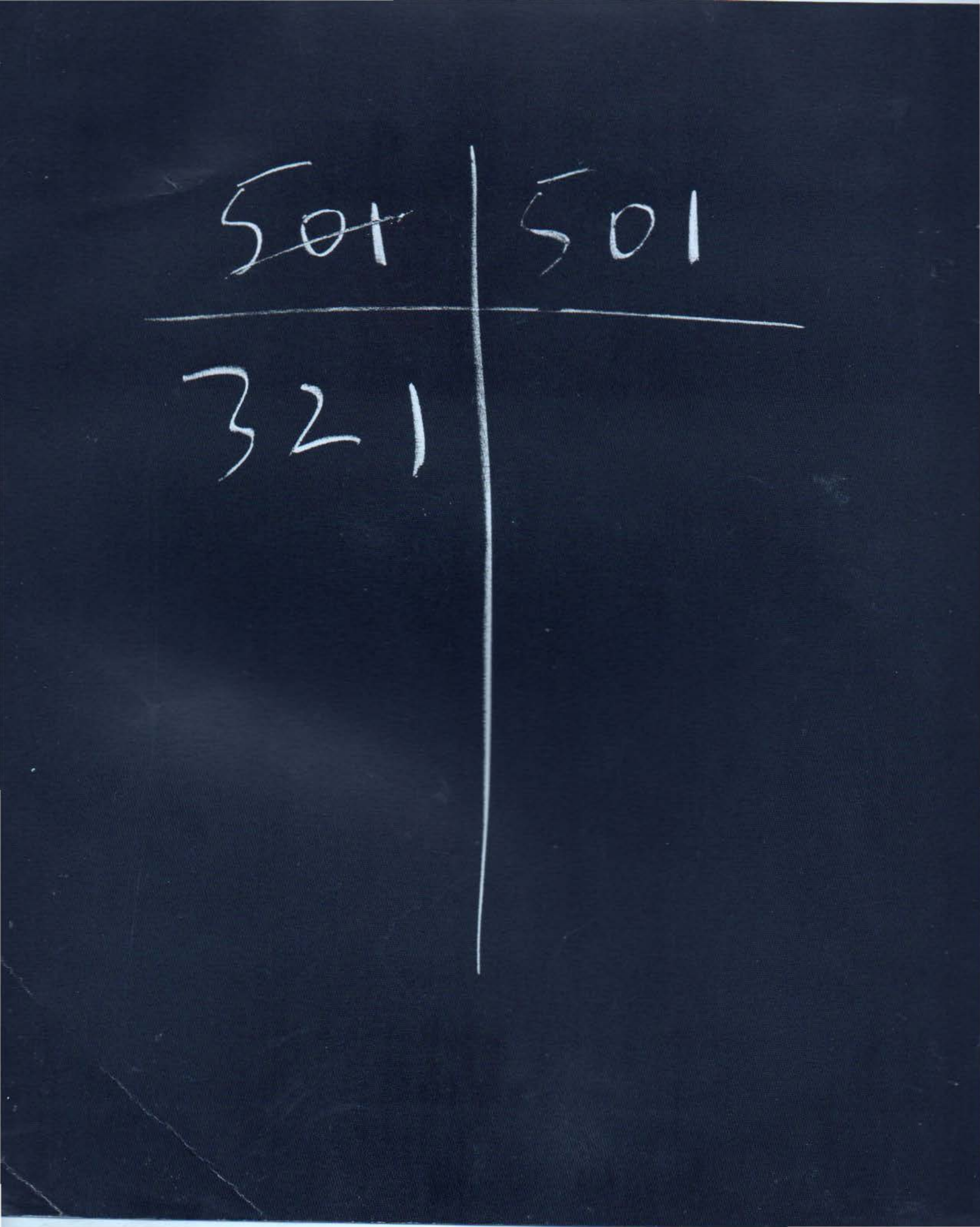
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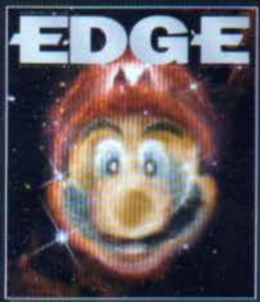
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Working on **Edge**, we rarely object to jumping on a train or plane in order to get things done, but in putting together this particular issue we've spent more time out of the office than is typical.

We travelled to QuakeCon in Dallas to talk with John Carmack about id's plans to change the way multiplatform games are made (see p12). We took a trip to BlizzCon in Anaheim in order to see how the team behind *World Of WarCraft* is ramping up its ambitions, and in which directions those ambitions are headed (p52). Back in England, we spent time in Brighton for Develop (p18) and to visit NCsoft's UK headquarters to sit down with Richard Garriott and discover his particular take on the future of massively multiplayer gaming (p62). While we were there we also got together with four leading UK game dev types to hear their views on some of the key issues facing the industry right now (p76). Then, in Scotland, we attended the Edinburgh Interactive Festival (p20).

We have, in short, spent a lot of time around other people who're passionate about games, often discussing how online communities will shape the evolution of the form, via MMOs or user-generated content or beyond. Because nowadays gamers mean more to the games they play than ever before.

This has even filtered through to *Super Mario Galaxy*, which, unlike its predecessors *64* and *Sunshine*, isn't a game to be played only on your own, but shared with others thanks to an option allowing a second person to collaborate. At its simplest level this may manifest itself in your companion aiming an onscreen pointer towards a particular area with a Remote rather than simply yelling "Go over there – no, over *there*!" but it proves surprisingly, and addictively, transformative. It's one of several innovations you can read more about beginning on p46.



EDGE

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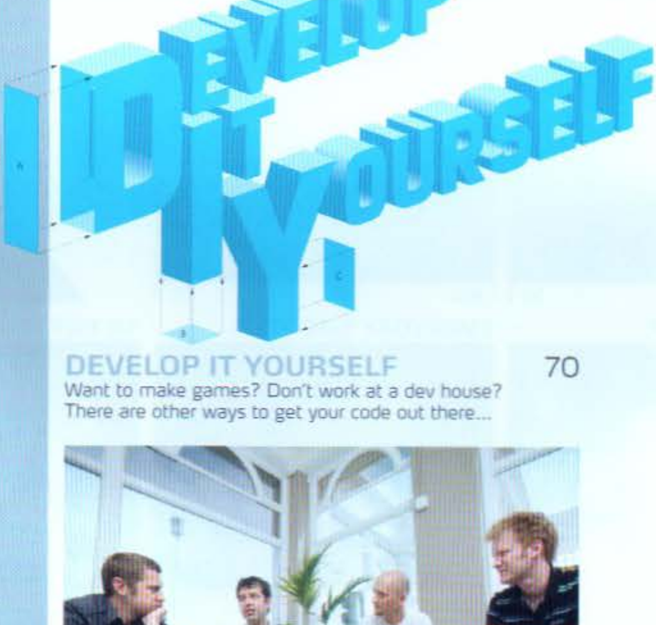
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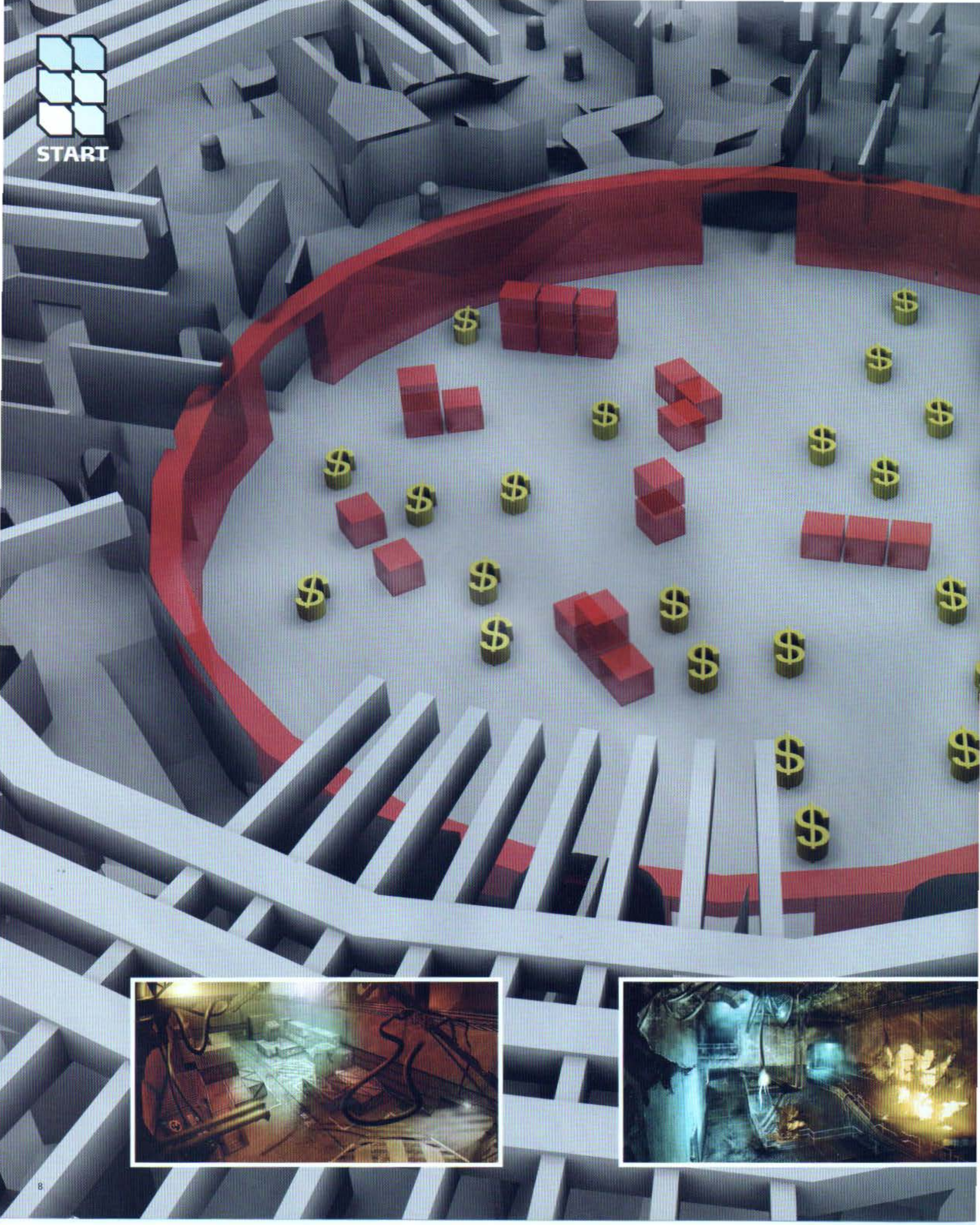
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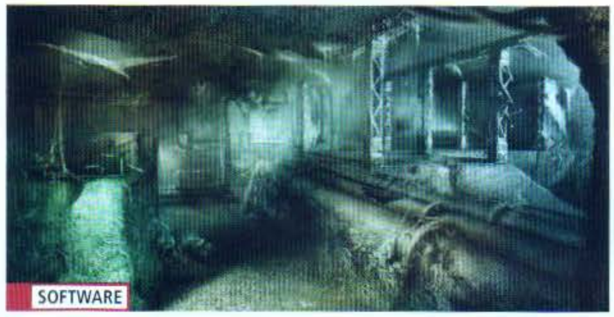
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START


START





A new arena for playing for prizes

A firstperson shooter driven by cash for kills may be about to revolutionise the world of skill-based gaming

Fruit machines, pachinko and bingo have many things in common, but the most obvious is their ability to transform cash into prizes – or, more often than not, nothing at all. Despite the odds, though, how many people can play only once, or resist putting one more pound into the quiz machine? There may seem to be a world of difference between playing a one-armed bandit in the hope of three cherries dropping in, watching your shiny coins transform into a cascade of silver spheres, or even translating a random sequence of numbers into cold, hard cash, but what's underlying the money is the same: primary conditioning mechanisms. The little triggers of risk and reward that exploit a basic human design quirk translate an enjoyable experience into a compulsive one.

Add skill-based gaming to that list. Though it seems a euphemistic term, in a sense being an attempt to avoid the gambling tag that brings with it moral approbation and shrill placard waving, it's a necessary distinction between traditional games of chance and games of skill that have elements of luck. Ultimately, it comes down to the fact that you can actually get better at skill-based gaming, but you'll be as good at roulette when you're 80 as when you're 18. The term itself has become somewhat of a buzzword, but the latest example has more going for it than most. *Kwari* is an upcoming game with the most basic of primary conditioning mechanisms, but it's also a proposition that is throwing most of the givens of online play out of



The Countdown map (main) is a highlight of the design: a transparent wall around an increasing pile of money. The doors open when only eight players are left







Eddie Gill's WorkBoy, which turned the original Game Boy into a PDA, was never released in 1991 because of rumours of the imminent arrival of a Colour Game Boy – which didn't appear until 1998

the window in a single-minded focus. It's all about the money. And throw money into the mix and a very specific segment of the gaming population may change irrevocably.

In one sense, we've heard it all before – similar claims have been made with the launch of nearly every gaming website that involves cash. But *Kwari* is interesting for the simple fact that it is the first FPS to have been built from the ground up to be played for money, rather than being a 'normal' game overlaid with a cash element. The technology behind it is tailored to this end: it's one of the first titles to be built using Australian firm BigWorld Technology's middleware (code that was originally designed for MMOs), and has a security system from LVS (which supplies tech to the likes of betting giants William Hill and Victor Chandler) at the back end. Companies always have to overstate their security credentials thanks to the fickle nature of consumer confidence, but *Kwari* should be financially watertight.

Basic machine-gun ammo may end up clocking in at something like £5 for 5,000 bullets, with costs rising for ammo that works with the game's more powerful weapons

That's just as well, because it's all about the money – the game's motto being 'merces pro mortuis', or 'cash for kills'. The finances are uncluttered when compared to several sites that take percentages or provide monthly statements, though, with the game itself free to download and the company's money made throug[h] charging for ammo. No hard figures have been quoted, but the basic machine-gun ammo may end up clocking in at something like £5 for 5,000 bullets, with costs rising for ammo that works with the more powerful weapons (which can, nevertheless, also be found in-game). Ammo apart, however, all other transactions are between the players, and you can claim your balance as real cash.

And it changes hands very quickly, with a counter on your HUD rarely stopping moving in either direction. We're back to the world of primary conditioning mechanisms: the most basic financial transactio[n] and game interaction being the 'reciprocator system' – if you shoot someone you get some of their money, if they shoot you they get some of yours. How much depends on one of the varying stake levels you've chosen (you're matched up with players from the same bracket). Each hit is accompanied by the visual cue of some scattering coins to indicate the exchange (the more powerful the shot, the more coins fly out, making an accurate grenade shot a visual as well as pecuniary treat), so combat can be quickly assessed and ducked out of if your money reserves seem to be diminishing too quickly.

There are also what are referred to as 'recurring accumulators' where choosing to, for example, jump out of a hectic firefight to a lower floor will cause you some cash damage: this money all goes int[o] a central pot from which player prizes are distributed. The total player jackpot is shown on your HUD in the form of rotating dollar signs, or

EDDIE GILL, creative producer, Kwari



Kwari's creative producer, **Eddie Gill**, has an interesting industry background. His software companies produced games for the likes of Ocean, Activision and Konami on platforms from the Spectrum to the Game Boy in the '80s and early '90s, but perhaps his 'five years too soon' inventor moment was the Work Boy in 1992, which converted the original Game Boy into a PDA with keyboard, translator, world map and even a DTMF (touch tone) dialler. We talk to him about the genesis and aims of *Kwari*.

What was the background to *Kwari*'s concept?
The idea came in 2000, when I saw Peter McDougall (then-GM of Nintendo Canada) speak at E3 and he said that "online gaming is thrilling from a consumer point of view, but somewhat more chilling from a business perspective." There were the likes of Epic making *Unreal*, but then making their money through retail sales. I realised the industry didn't have an appropriate business model or a profitable strategy. The game itself has an arcade approach to an established gametype. I'm a gamer, and the games I tend to prefer are action games. When I looked at gaming communities I saw the shooters were competitive at a very high standard – I thought they'd appreciate the chance to up the ante in this way.

There's a lot of research into gaming psychology behind *Kwari* – how has this been incorporated?
We looked at the psychology of games where it's necessary to attract the player and keep them interested, and the mechanisms they use to be compelling. What we've taken are the psychological drivers in games that people play for money, like frequent small payouts, and applied them to competitive games. A key design decision was to make it a game that would not legally be considered as gambling. There are contradictions because of that. In many skill-based games, and *Kwari* is one of those, the best player always wins – but that doesn't work with cash, because you have one or two rolling in it and everyone below them losing money.

What I expect of Kwari, and it's a big claim, is to invent professional gaming. That doesn't mean professional in terms of skills or tournaments. It means money. We're not taking an existing game and adding cash to it

Do you think that will affect how people judge the game?
I think of how gameplayers will judge *Kwari*, and I think it'll be on profit and loss. Traditionally, games have been about triumph and glory – that all goes out of the window. One day you'll be up, the next day you'll be down, and occasionally you might pick up a big prize.

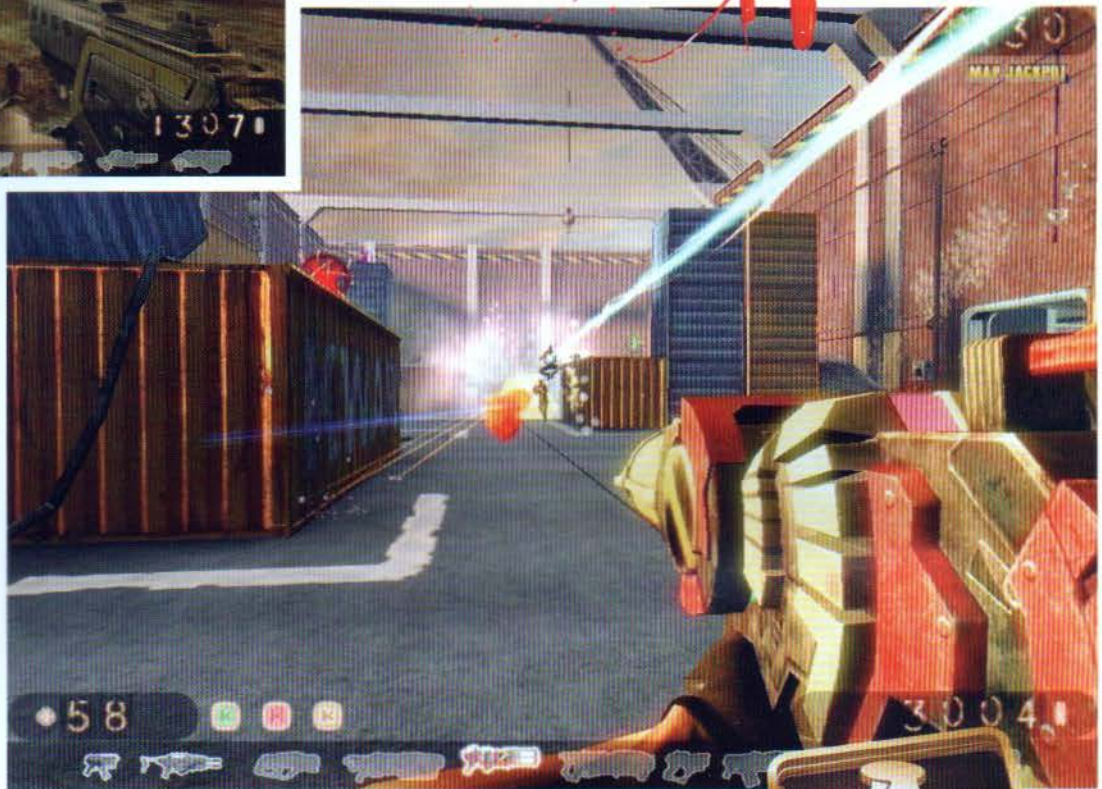
Do you expect that to be the appeal of *Kwari*?
What I expect of *Kwari*, and it's a big claim, is to invent professiona[l] gaming. That doesn't mean professional in terms of skills or tournaments. It means money. We're not taking an existing gam[e] and adding cash to it. When you play *Kwari* you quickly realise tha[t] the fact it's designed around money means it's played in a different way to any other FPS. It changes everything: as the userbase grows, eventually we're aiming for a several-million-dolla[r] jackpot that will go to one player. A *Kwari* millionaire. At the moment the high-score table might be the ultimate objective, but from here on that's very much second place.





Compared with some FPS designs, *Kwari's* colours and shapes seem conventional, and aiming for a certain level of familiarity





sequences of collectable keys – the aim being to reach a critical mass of players that will support a golden ticket situation and a $1,000,000 bounty. Such a setup clearly remains to be seen, but inserting lucky jackpots means that the game is as much about exploring locations thoroughly as it is simply running to the nearest firefight.

But, of course, combat is still the meat of the game. It's worth being clear that *Kwari* isn't *Halo* – but it doesn't need to be. In fact, it seems to have been designed as a shooter that is, first and foremost, basic enough to be played by most people: simple controls and utilitarian levels. The innovation is almost entirely in the way it is played.

Each match is composed of four rounds, the first three short bursts of 16 players in a deathmatch situation. These play as usual, although you'll find the fact that you're losing money for damage means your play is far more careful than usual – you're much less inclined to charge in with grenades flying and shots around your ears, simply because you'll probably lose as much money as you gain. Affecting this slightly is the appearance of a 'Pill' near the end of the round, which is essentially an oddball that contains cash collected from the recurring accumulators. Players can move and fire normally while holding it, but their position is always shown on other players' HUDs: there are two cash prizes, one for holding the pill the longest, and the other for holding it as the round ends. As it spawns, one of a number of rock tracks.begins to crank up (at their loudest when you're holding the pill but getting louder as you get closer to it when not in possession) and



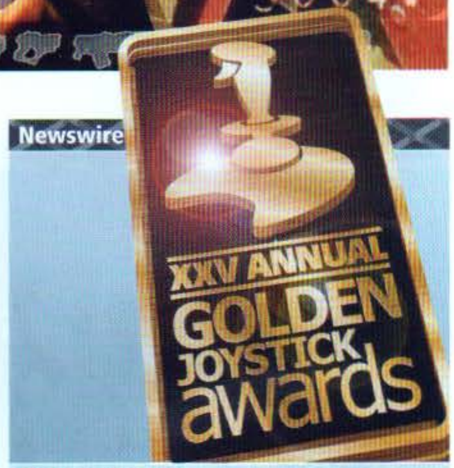
Up close, the flamethrower is fairly cash-intensive for the lucky wielder. The coins flying out of the other player are a purely visual indicator and don't have a physical presence in the game

players begin congregating. It's an exercise in crescendo above all else, and works extremely well.

In terms of innovations, however, *Kwari* saves its real trump card for last: Countdown, the fourth match in each series. This takes place in a doughnut-shaped structure, where the 'hole' is a sealed, transparent arena, and the ring is an intricate patchwork of destructible corridors. As Countdown begins, 64 players are spawned into random positions and have a few seconds to move before firing begins. However, as the walls disappear and the numbers of players dwindle, a cash counter on the screen increases – because in this mode, all the money goes into the sealed arena. When the 64 are reduced to eight, the arena opens its gates.

With ideas on how to rework the basic FPS concept that go beyond the usual, combined with the business model behind it, *Kwari*'s an interesting proposition. Of course, the magic ingredient is cash – and until players have begun putting real money into its framework, any predictions are premature. And, while there's certainly gold in the online gaming hills, even at this early stage they're also proving a graveyard. *Kwari* looks like it has a better prospect of working than most, even if the success or failure of its skill-based offering might be subject to the vagaries of the cruel mistress it left behind: chance.

Newswire



Get your vote on

The Golden Joystick Awards celebrate their 25th anniversary this year, and the shortlists have now been drawn up. With votes being cast by the public, there are some surprises: the Online Game Of The Year award predictably features *WOW* and *Eve Online* expansions, but console gaming is encroaching on that territory with *Gears Of War, Resistance: Fall Of Man* and even *Mario Strikers*. The overall GOTY award contains no great unknowns – though it's good to see *Company Of Heroes* among the big hitters – but covers the field between titles as wide as *Test Drive Unlimited* and *LOTR Online*. Votes can be cast at www.goldenjoystick.com and the gongs will be awarded on October 26.

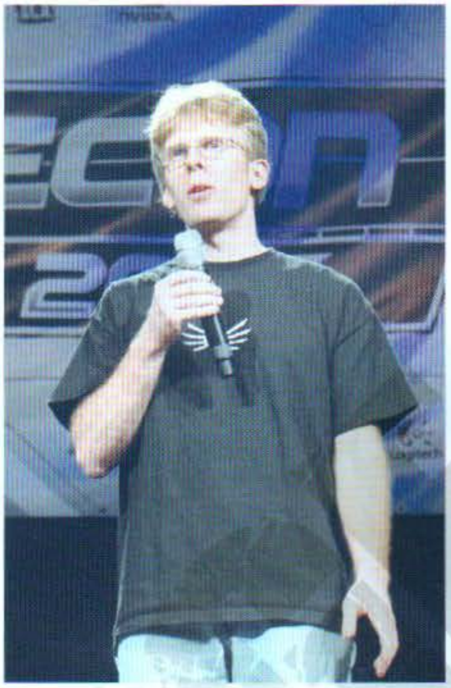




EVENT

The wizardry of id

We meet John Carmack at QuakeCon to discover id's future: a new IP, old IP repackaged, plus more revolutionary tech



John Carmack's keynote address – which covered subjects from controlling space shuttles via wifi to using Apple's business structure to identify and solve lag – was received rapturously

Id Software is one of the most iconic companies in the videogame industry. Not only did it once ride the wave of PC gaming in the early to mid-'90s, it pushed PC gaming fully forward – technologically, financially, aesthetically and culturally. The developer's impact is not hyperbole, but a matter of record.

But for any 16-year-old company, things are bound to have changed. And id Software is no exception. The contrast between the ids past and present was sharply visible at QuakeCon in August, the company's annual event that draws fans from across the world on a scale that's starting to resemble the Scandinavian demo scene.

At a large hotel in Dallas, Texas, some 7,000 fans gathered for four days and nights of playing beta versions of *Quake Wars: Enemy Territory* while drinking highly caffeinated soda. Besides tournaments, prizes and pizza, and exhibitors showing off the next generation of PC gear, they also come to witness the keynote address by CTO and last remaining co-founder **John Carmack**.

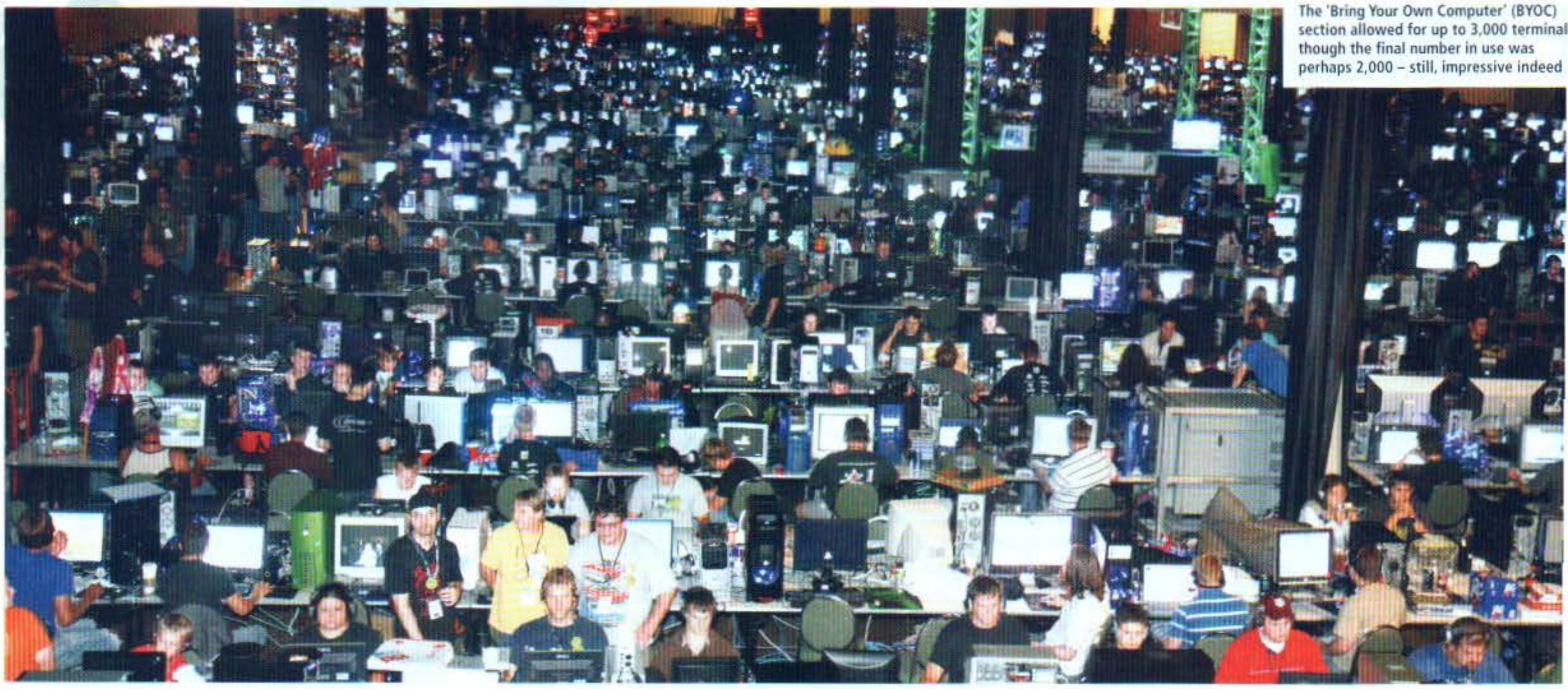
Known as Carmack's Talk, it's delivered extemporaneously for hours on a range of technical topics, with details about id's plans, and



An environment build from *Rage*, id's new IP (and more from the realtime demo sequence, top). With aspirations beyond the FPS template, it is the company's most ambitious project to date

the world of games, graphics and even amateur space rockets. Carmack's tone might come across as somewhat robotic, but his speeches also somehow manage to be mesmerising, not least because of his enthusiasm for technological minutiae. As a result, at QuakeCon, he can hold an audience that largely understands nothing about the programming technicalities and development procedures to which he routinely refers.

In last year's keynote, Carmack said some surprising things: the quintessential PC game

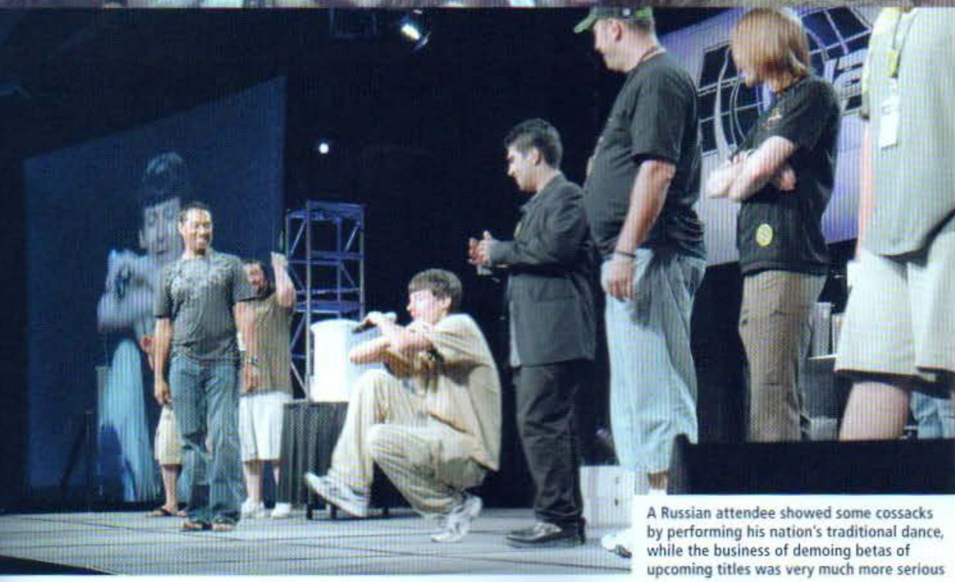


The 'Bring Your Own Computer' (BYOC) section allowed for up to 3,000 terminals though the final number in use was perhaps 2,000 – still, impressive indeed







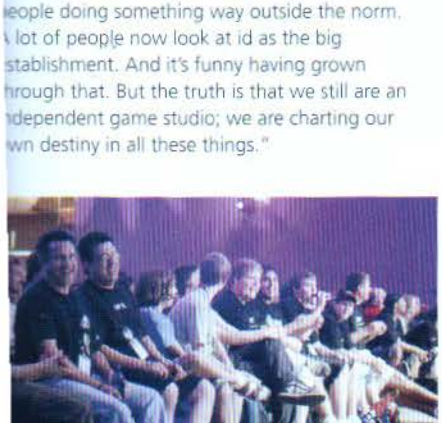


A Russian attendee showed some cossacks by performing his nation's traditional dance, while the business of demoing betas of upcoming titles was very much more serious



developer would move to a completely cross-platform approach, something that started with *Doom 3* and was followed with announcements of various versions of *Quake Wars: Enemy Territory.* No longer would id exclusively make firstperson shooter games – its new property was said to feature thirdperson cameras and enormous outdoor areas. He said graphics were reaching a point of diminishing returns, and the design was becoming the important part of the equation. In fact, there was one surreal moment when it seemed that id Software, the house of technology, was saying 'design is law'. It certainly appeared that some changes were underway at the company, but they were hard to pin down.

"It is kind of funny how id is sort of establishment now," Carmack tells us in an interview during this year's convention. "Sixteen years ago we were the scrappy little group of people doing something way outside the norm. A lot of people now look at id as the big establishment. And it's funny having grown through that. But the truth is that we still are an independent game studio; we are charting our own destiny in all these things."



The enthusiasm of the crowd makes QuakeCon a more boisterous experience than many of the other conferences that now exist

Stepping into a demonstration room, we see a long table against the far wall. On it there is an Apple computer, with a large flatscreen television. There is a high-end PC with an identical display. There is an Xbox 360 and a PlayStation 3. And each is showing the same gameworld, all of it running from the same build of the game, which happens to be *Rage*, id's newly announced title, of which a short sliver was shown during a technology demo at the Apple World Wide Developers Conference earlier this year.

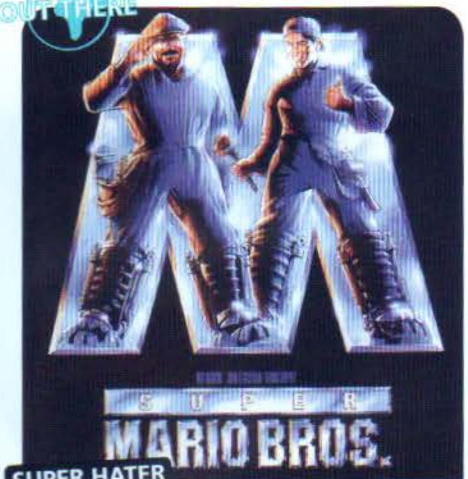
"It is kind of funny how id is sort of establishment now. Sixteen years ago we were the scrappy little group of people doing something way outside the norm"

Only now, the full trailer is available. The audio begins with a guitar being strummed. A loudly buzzing and highly detailed fly appears in the centre of the screen and zips away, the camera following, as drums beat. The fly is grabbed by a strange man wearing a helmet. He becomes the centre of attention, peers closer, then speaks: "I know what you want, forgotten man, but I have to tell you: you have a long road ahead." The footage fades to cars racing through desert canyons and a sharp cut to deformed humanoids, brutally attacking the player. And then the logo appears, bright red with a black background: *Rage*.

"Obviously this is a departure from the games id has been making for so long," begins Carmack. It was time to try something new, he felt. "It's always a bit gutsy making a cross-platform triple-A play with a new IP on there."

The long continuing development of *Quake Wars: Enemy Territory* makes a good example of

OUT THERE

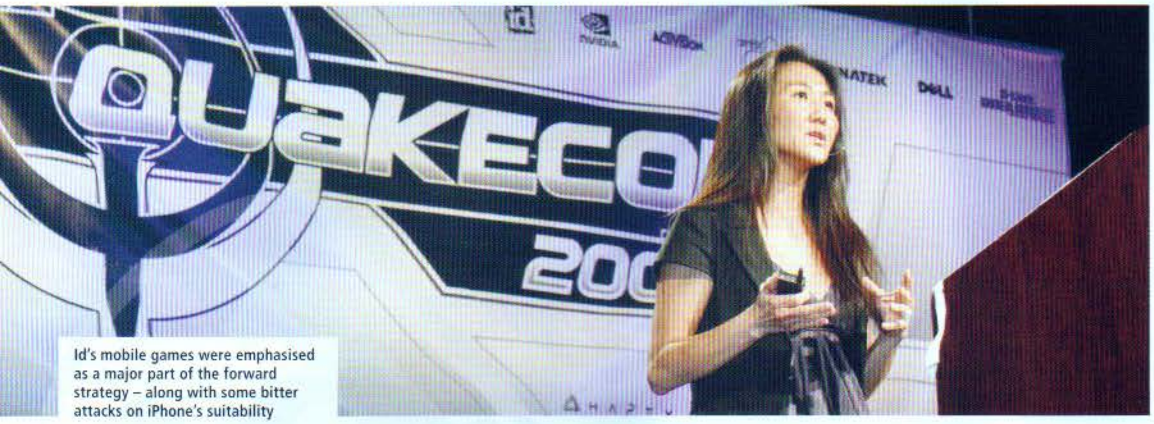


SUPER HATER MARIO

An interview in The Guardian this month confirms what's long been suspected of the world's favourite plumber: there's a potty mouth behind that 'tache. Speaking of his life and his method, actor Bob Hoskins arrives with a bang at his time on the Super Mario Bros movie. "It was a fuckin' nightmare," he recalls. "The whole experience was a nightmare. It had a husband-and-wife team directing, whose arrogance had been mistaken for talent. After so many weeks their own agent told them to get off the set! Fuckin' nightmare. Fuckin' idiots. Let's see another videogame movie engender that kind of hatred from a distinguished British actor. It can't be done! The bar is simply too low." Three words, Mr Hoskins. Ben. Kingsley. Bloodrayne.



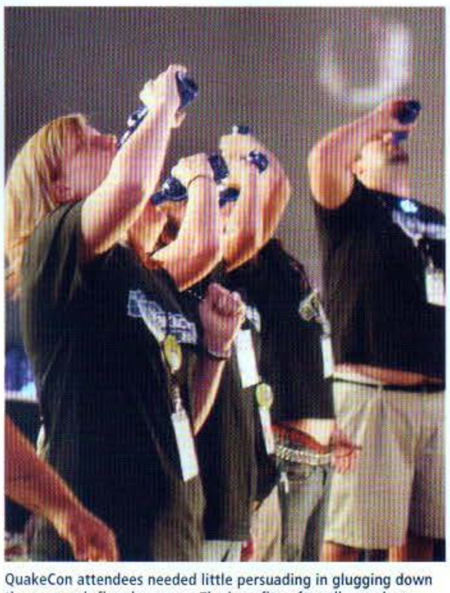




Id's mobile games were emphasised as a major part of the forward strategy – along with some bitter attacks on iPhone's suitability

the difficulties faced by developers attempting to achieve the business necessity of creating games for multiple platforms. In *Quake Wars*' case, there were four companies in different parts of the world working on various versions for different systems, which proved both frustrating and expensive. The technology id intends to cross this hurdle with is called id Tech 5, and it's designed to run seamlessly between PS3, 360, PC and Mac. It will allow id to build the game and have it come out on all platforms without the hassle of drawn-out ports. "Which is a pretty big deal," points out Carmack.

"An artist can do as much as they want with the surfaces, and have zero impact on the game performance, the footprint, or the stability, and that's huge"



QuakeCon attendees needed little persuading in glugging down the sponsor's fizzy beverage. The benefits, after all, are clear

Id Tech 5 also employs the MegaTexture technique, a way of using a single large flat texture for walls, terrain and surfaces in each environment. It's streamed off the disc as required, and contrasts with the usual method of composing a level with many different preloaded textures. Crucially, it improves the development process for artists because they can edit and develop surface textures without disrupting development on the rest of the game. "An artist can do as much as they want with the surfaces, and have zero impact on the game performance, the footprint, or the stability, and that's huge," says Carmack.

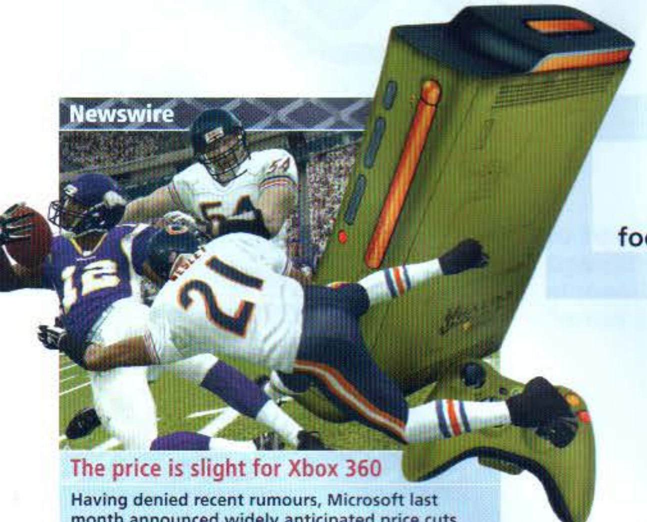
Also friendly towards artists is idStudio, which provides an easy to use but sophisticated toolset for artists to create environments. "It's almost an artist's dream in many ways, where the world's a canvas and they can just go in and work on it," Carmack evangelises. By requiring them to understand fewer picky technical details and system constraints and resource budgeting, he hopes idStudio will attract a different class and scale of artist. "Which, in the game industry, is something we need to do." He hopes to see something like Hollywood, where studios might bring in 50 set painters at a time, a feature that will allow easier outsourcing. "We haven't been able to do that in the game industry because everything is too interconnected."

Not only is the technology remarkable, but id hopes to be able to license it to other developers as it has done with previous engines through the years. *Doom 3*'s engine might have only been used once, for *Prey*, while other parties were choosing Unreal Engine 3's suite, but recently id hired a new director of business development, Steve Nix, who believes that 30 licensees of id Tech 5 would not be unreasonable – a development that could give Epic a run for its money.

Also supporting the high cost of creating *Rage* is id's continuing strategy of creating smaller scale games for other formats, such as its *Orcs & Elves* adventure RPG mobile phone game, which is now seeing a sequel on Nintendo's DS – something that will only cost £250,000 to develop. Now the franchise is ready to be scaled up again. "Maybe we do a Wii version next... with a magic wand," Carmack speculates.

Yet another major change is that the company is adding a second team, and trying to grow to 30 staff. First, they will make *Quake Zero*, a free-to-play browser-based version of *Quake Arena*, supported entirely by advertisers. Once that second team has gained experience, it will use id Tech 5 for a new version of *Quake Arena*. "I've been pretty rabid over the years, trying to keep the company as small as possible," admits Carmack (id has only grown an average of two employees per year). He

Newswire



The price is slight for Xbox 360

Having denied recent rumours, Microsoft last month announced widely anticipated price cuts for Xbox 360 in both the US and Canada. Timed to coincide with the release of *Madden NFL '08*, the US cuts knock the price of Premium models to $350 (£170), Core models to $280 (£140) and set the price of the new Elite models at $450 (£220). The limited-release *Halo 3* Special Edition model will arrive at $400 (£200), which includes matching wireless controller, 20Gb hard drive, headset and Play And Charge kit. In Canada, meanwhile, Premium models will be priced at $400CDN (£185), Core models at $300CDN (£140), Elite models at $500CDN (£230) and *Halo 3* editions at $500CDN (£210). No European price cuts have yet been announced, although the territory's lack of enthusiasm for *Madden* may offer an explanation for this oversight.



Apparently this was all held together with 'chewing gum and a wish' – which must make those chandeliers quite dangerous – but by the time of the main talks the hall was full and the announcements proved worth the wait. Among them was that id is considering allowing custom avatars in a new arena-based shooter

says it has been a tough decision, but necessary for id to continue to make all of the games it wants to. And the move should result in a higher output from the studio.

Just before QuakeCon's keynote, id employees were rushing to adjust the slideshow presentation at the last moment. "We're holding this together with chewing gum and a wish," remarked **Todd Hollenshead**, the company's CEO. But when he went onstage moments later, everything went smoothly. And fans were delighted to learn that nearly all of the old id games – from *Commander Keen* to *Doom* to *Hexen* to *Quake* – would be available for modern systems through Steam. With a new game announced and the company demonstrating a solid foundation, the crowds of attendees left the show excited.

Id may no longer occupy its infamous 'Suite 666' office address, and the staff at id Software aren't in their early 20s any more. But one thing that clearly remains the same is Carmack's fascination with new technology. "It comes in waves," he says. He already has a gameplan for where id Software's going in next-generation technology, even though that would be for a game six years away from shipping.

And while id Software has accomplished a great deal in the history of videogames, Carmack is focused completely on the future and the moment. "I don't spend much time thinking about the history and legacy of things. Some people are quite surprised about how little I care or think about the history. Really, I'm thinking about what we're doing now. And that's the way it is for practically every aspect of my life," he concludes, before adding: "The golden age is right now."





Various awards and announcements were made throughout the event, though nothing topped Carmack – whose targets included patent law, mobile phones, Java and even some of id's decisions



Id's announcements in full

There's more than firstperson shooters to look forward to

The Return To Castle Wolfenstein movie
Written by Roger Avary (Pulp Fiction, Beowulf), and produced by Samuel Hadida (Silent Hill, Resident Evil)

Wolfenstein Game
No details, but id, Raven and Threewave are collaborating on the next title in the series

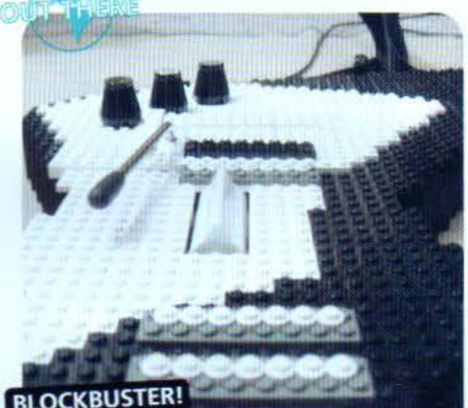
Steam
Id Software's back catalogue of titles – optimised for use on modern PCs – is now available from Valve's digital distribution service

Quake Zero
A modern version of *Quake Arena* – set to run through a web browser, free of charge to play, and funded by advertising revenue – is on its way

Quake Arena Arcade
Headed to Xbox Live Arcade

Rage
The big new Mad Max-styled IP is named. It will be T-rated in the US and will arrive on two DVDs or one Blu-ray disc. Expect it to appear in late 2008

OUT THERE





BLOCKBUSTER!

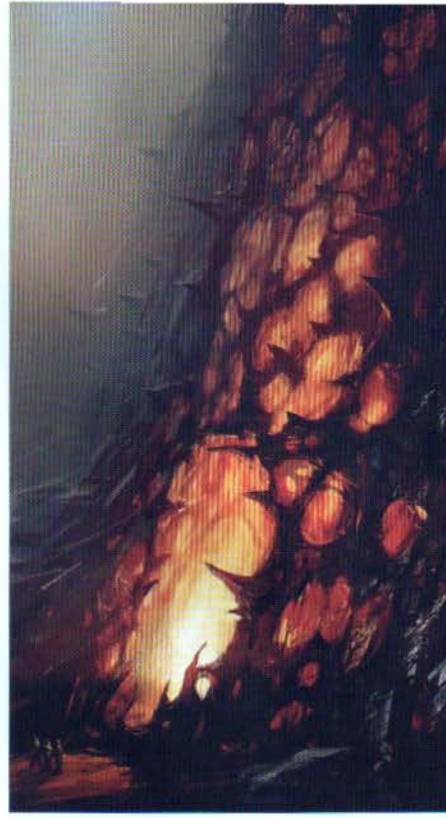
You can imagine Spinal Tap receiving something like this seconds before going on stage. Measuring a good foot longer than RedOctane's original, the world's first Lego *Guitar Hero* controller includes not just the strap, but the fully functioning innards as well. The creator, an anonymous poster on TechEBlog.com, describes modelling the beast on the Gibson Explorer guitar, adding an 'extra-large scratch-plate for style'. It's not the first attempt to build a replica game controller out of plastic bricks, but few others have retained the functionality of the original device. How it plays is anyone's guess – badly and painfully, you'd assume – but smashing it against the floor should at least be a doddle, albeit something with the maiming capacity of a nail-bomb.





INTERVIEW





Building the Guild

Guild Wars' designer talks about the fallacy of WOW killers, and building MMOs for consoles



Jeff Strain (above) is one of the founders of NCsoft's ArenaNet, the MMO developer behind the non-fee-based *Guild Wars*. Formerly at Blizzard, he was lead coder on *World Of WarCraft*, and recently visited the UK to present *Eye Of The North*, a new *Guild Wars* expansion. We met him to talk about how the MMO scene has changed since *Guild Wars* was released, and the politics of involving players in its development.

What role does player feedback take in the way *Guild Wars* has evolved?

We very much pay attention to what our players are saying, but you have to bring a certain level of judgement. We have to be the shepherds of the long-term health of the game. Sometimes we have to make decisions that might appear as if we haven't listened to the people, but we will have, and weighed it against the long term.

The likes of *Eve Online* have given their players some power to influence the game – how do you mediate players' requests for change?

It's delicate. I think the most important factor is that you have to visibly establish that you do listen. You're not always going to act on that, or make decisions that everyone agrees with. But if there's a fundamental belief that you listen then there's a respect you're showing to your players that can soften decisions that some players don't like.

***Guild Wars* was intended as an attempt to rectify some of the problems with MMOs – how do you think those issues have changed since it was released?**

We were concerned by two trends. The first was the business model. There was this belief in the industry, based on the success of *EverQuest*, that subscription-based gaming was the future, that you could throw a game online and just start charging people, and we didn't believe that. There are some great subscription games out there, but we didn't want to see a culture where everybody just believed blindly that every online game should be that way. I think we've been quite successful in shaking off that notion.

Only quite successful?

OK, *Guild Wars* has been overwhelmingly successful for us, and it was built not to require a subscription fee. Yes, we don't have an army of GMs marching through the world helping players, but the game's not built to require it. Now in 2007 if someone announces a subscription-based game, players will want to know what they'll get, and that has been one of *Guild Wars*' legacies. The





Aimed at players that have achieved the top level of 20, *Eye Of The North* will not have a tutorial, and feature 150 new skills, 40 new armour sets, ten heroes and various other items, collectibles and character titles. Many elements have been chosen to please fans



EOTN is an expansion to the game rather than a new episode, so there'll be no new professions, and it'll require ownership of one of the previous three campaign titles











The expansion will continue the storyline begun with *Guild Wars'* first campaign, Prophecies, and will introduce three new nonplayable races in three new regions

other thing was what we perceived to be stagnation in MMO design. We wanted to shake it up a bit and show people that MMOs don't have to follow *EverQuest*'s formula. So I hope to see over the next five, ten years people learning from us and other games and exploring new business models. We're starting to see virtual item sales and people experimenting with advertising.

A lot of these ideas come from Korea, yes?
Yeah, and I respect that. But also on the design front I want people to demand and expect something different from us, and never be satisfied with rehashes of the same mechanics over and over again.

***Age Of Conan* is experimenting with new forms of fighting – are you seeing other signs of fresh ideas?**
I am. Some games are experimenting – *Conan*'s a good example. *Tabula Rasa* is another. Obviously, these projects are many, many million-dollar projects and you've got to make smart decisions. I'd be very concerned about, say, hearing of a horror MMO. What makes MMOs are the social dynamics and large communities, so if you constrict the genre you'll be less likely to attract them.

Could it also be the case that you've got to differentiate any game from *World Of WarCraft* in order to have a chance of success?
The way we look at it is that 80 to 90 per cent of MMO makers would describe their game as a '*WOW* killer'. But I sit there and I shake my head because Blizzard is going to make the *WOW* killer. Don't put yourself in the position of chasing the leader. Go carve yourself out your own space, innovate. If you come out with your *WOW* killer at the same time as Blizzard does, then they've already got the momentum. You've got to do something that's different.

Do you think the social side of MMOs can be developed?
I do. The strength of social interaction is directly tied to how much stuff you can do. In games right now there are a lot of things you can acquire and see, but they're fairly limited in terms of stuff you can do. The opposite extreme is in *Second Life*, where you can do anything but there's no structure or coherent feeling of place. I think that the game industry needs to understand that freedom within structure is the key to success, so the real goal is for us to create the structure of the world and let players do anything they want to in that. That is how you really make people feel like they're immersed, and we're just scratching the surface of that.

"80 to 90 per cent of MMO makers would describe their game as a 'WOW killer'. But Blizzard will make the WOW killer. Don't put yourself in the position of chasing the leader"

PlayStation 3 has been announced as NCsoft's console of choice. Why Sony?
Sony stepped up to the plate. They fundamentally understand what we've been saying for a while, which is that these aren't games, they're services. As developers, we can't be put into a situation where our ability to meet players' needs for new content, whether for sale or free, is hindered because we have to ask someone else if and when we can do that. Sony understands that MMOs and the way they're supported is fundamentally different to putting a disc in a box and selling it in a store. So kudos to them for going out on a limb and saying that this is the future and embracing it.

So Microsoft was less willing?
I can only assume so, though I wasn't involved. It's Sony that has committed.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

No doubt inspired or stunned by the growths of Webkinz, Club Penguin and Nicktropolis, Aardman Animations has launched its own browser-based virtual world for kids, called WebbliWorld. Developed in association with the World Wildlife Fund, the site provides the usual modular array of games, applications and chatrooms while promoting some environmental awareness on the side. Beautifully designed, its population of angular 3D characters build the user's favourite modules into landscapes of psychedelic 'WebbliStaks' – its WebbliWorld safety officer, Alfonso, prepping kids for life beyond its regulated grounds. Alfonso, it should be noted, 'never leaves a cannon at speed without his reinforced moustache and concrete crash helmet'.

Site:
WebbliWorld
URL:
www.webbliworld.com

SOUNDBYTES

"Actually, because the number of units sold was not as high as we hoped, the loss was better than our original expectation"
Sony's chief financial officer **Nobuyuki Oneda** puts an optimistic spin on PS3's below-par sales to date

"Government guys are just like everyone else. And the more that is true of me the better I'll be able to represent a great number of people of Guam. I only WISH I got XP by signing all the government documents while levelling to 70"
Guam's senator **Ray Tenorio** comes out as the owner of a level 70 Dwarf Princess

"Before the meeting, I egged you on a little bit, because we were discussing it. You said you didn't think they were going to go for it, and that you should pull out some underpants"
Tim Rance, Lionhead CTO, reminds Peter Molyneux about the tactics he once used to negotiate with EA

"Mario and every other game since then [have] gold coins sprinkled everywhere... and that satisfies your reward-seeking reflex and pacifies you into continuing to play the game. I actually think that [it's] unethical. [It] keeps the player playing, a sure sign that the core gameplay is not actually rewarding enough, and thus you are deceiving your players"
Hey, Miyamoto, indie game dev **Jonathan Blow** has a problem with that stuff you do

"As an industry, we won. We just won. But with that, as an industry, we're drinking from the firehose. When you have 1,000 big thrills a year, where are the big thrills?"
EA chief technology officer **Glenn Entis** reveals at Siggraph something related to CGI in the movie industry. When we work out what it is, we'll let you know





EVENT

Local heroes shine at Develop in Brighton

The south coast's second industry conference once more boasts a packed programme, the inevitable result being a lack of focus

There's something depressing about a washed-out summer in a seaside town. With intermittent rain and a strong wind whipping the Channel into great rollers on to the beach outside the Hilton Brighton Metropole hotel (a dingy place at the best of times), it was hard to escape the feeling that we might be better off abroad than at the Develop conference.

Now in its second year, Develop (from July 15-17) might have pretensions towards being an important conference on the European calendar, but it remains a steadfastly British affair, with a great majority of speakers and attendees being natives. Indeed, the prevalence of Brighton-based companies – Relentless, which was giving away free ice creams outside the hotel, Kuju's Zoë Mode and NCsoft Europe – was charming but did much to emphasise the colloquial nature of the show. The fact that most attendees already knew each other lent it a pleasantly friendly atmosphere, though it perhaps also meant that few new contacts were being made. But it did demonstrate something of the vibrancy of the British development scene, with attendees spanning middleware, mobile phone software and games, the internet and education, as well as the more traditional videogame development fraternity.

Like last year, throughout the two days various streams of presentations were scheduled to run concurrently throughout the sprawling conference area, making choices over what to see difficult, and a distinct theme running through the conference impossible to discern.

Keynotes included a day one opening salvo from Destination Games' (and former Origin head) Richard Garriott, who blasted away at the state of MMO design and illustrated, with his own forthcoming game *Tabula Rasa*, how it could all be fixed (read the interview which begins on page 64 to find out more).

Day one's evening keynote was by Chris Satchell, general manager of Microsoft's XNA Group, who delivered a state-of-the-nation speech about the need for videogame creators to support user-generated content and how he was branded a 'heretic' at Microsoft for pushing through XNA Game Studio Express. His attempts to coin buzz-phrases may have been rather reminiscent of Phil Harrison's 'Game 3.0' keynote at GDC earlier this year, but his argument that community-based creation was vital to the future of videogaming was wise and inspirational.

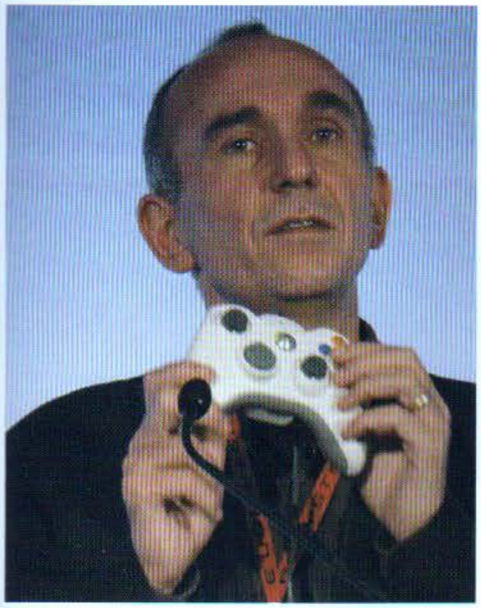


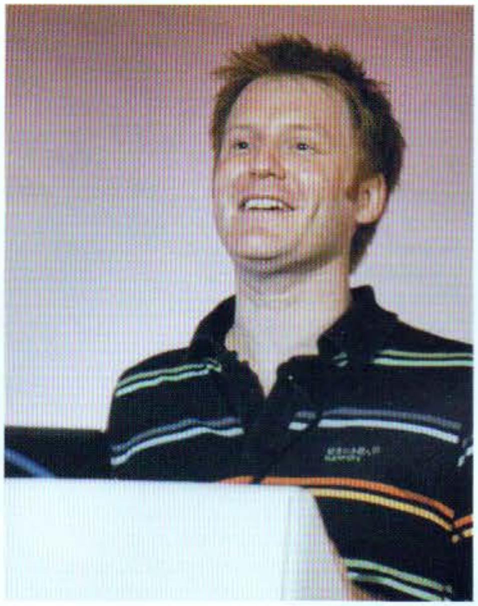
SCEJ's Tsumoto Kouno revealed his *LocoRoco* concept sketches, which were remarkably similar to the form the final game took



Clockwise from right: Microsoft's Chris Satchell's keynote on XNA Game Studio Express struck a nerve; Richard Garriott's keynote was bombastic; Relentless' David Amor accused the specialist gaming press of snobbishness, and Peter Molyneux again showed *Fable 2*









In the conference-closing round of *Buzz* (below), *Broken Sword* man Charles Cecil (left) was knocked out in the first round. Relentless had created the customised game especially for the session, and feared that it would crash. It didn't



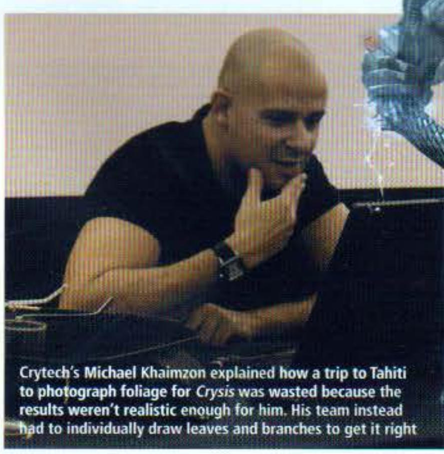
The following morning saw delegates, many quite 'tired' from the previous night's Develop Awards, witness SCEJ's **Tsumoto Kouno** engagingly describe and show videos of *LocoRoco*'s gestation. He also appeared to begin to explain the styling of the Mojya enemies, which have been likened to racist stereotypes. "To tell the truth, they were designed for another game," he said, before demonstrating a music-based 3D title that featured similar creatures. Promisingly, his interests right now are on developing some of the mechanisms that constitute some of *LocoRoco*'s best features – physics, crowd AI and music.

Those looking for more outspoken sessions seemed pleased with David Braben happily claiming he was 'really not impressed' by current-generation games

The sessions themselves struggled, like last year, with their pitches. Design & Story: Beyond The Cutscene, which attempted to explore how lessons from cinema could inform game storytelling, was simplistic and depressingly upheld various tired cinematic ideals as useful to videogames. Others, such as a lesson in implementing downloadable songs in PS3 *SingStar*, were extremely specialised.

But better ones, such as *Crysis* art director Michael Khaimzon on how he has implemented the principle of 'simulating reality', and Relentless' David Amor on making widely appealing 'social games', were fascinating snapshots of some of the challenges that developers are currently facing. And those looking for more outspoken sessions seemed pleased with David Braben happily claiming he was 'really not impressed' by current-generation games – that is, until his own game, *The Outsider*, comes out.

Ultimately, the weather actually did a lot to cement the occasion, even forcing pavement smokers to spend as little time outdoors as possible, and the whole thing ended with a 'celebrity' (Molyneux, Cecil et al) development-themed game of *Buzz* made specifically for the show, compered by a delightfully scabrous Simon Byron. The winner was a local game consultant. It was a result that epitomised the conference as a whole: an amiable affair, if little to write a postcard home about.



Crytech's Michael Khaimzon explained how a trip to Tahiti to photograph foliage for *Crysis* was wasted because the results weren't realistic enough for him. His team instead had to individually draw leaves and branches to get it right





EDINBURGH INTERACTIVE FESTIVAL

Expanding the Creative Culture of Games



EVENT

Gamespotting

The Edinburgh Interactive Festival has been renamed again, but its identity is still unclear

If there was one problem with the Edinburgh Interactive Festival, which ran from August 12-14, it's the new name. 'Interactive' implies a breadth of subject matter that it would be impossible for the festival to even attempt to encompass.

But try it did, and the event featured three (out of 13) sessions that were about digital media rather than games. Comprising speakers from Endemol, the BBC and Simon Fuller's 19 Entertainment, each noncommittally acknowledged gaming's dynamism and impact on the media landscape but failed to outline meaningful and fruitful interactions between TV, internet and videogames.

Those sessions that were more focused often failed to celebrate the 'creative culture of games' that the festival's strapline said the festival would expand. The first day did more to show the business context games are being created within, rather than what this context means for them on a creative level. In Monday's keynote, for instance, the quietly spoken Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot outlined his company's future directions, a series of reactive, me-too strategies that did much to suggest that the company is playing catch-up to the likes of Nintendo. A later presentation of Ubisoft DS titles such as *Horsez* and *My Life Coach* only seemed to confirm the comparison.

The EIF Edge Award was presented to Capcom for Okami. Unable to receive the award in person, Capcom sent an acceptance video featuring a grateful stuffed Ameratsu

Thank any passing deity, then, for CCP's Hilmar Petursson, who gave a self-deprecating speech about society in *Eve Online* and how its players routinely engage with complex issues like governance and economics. Not only because it was the first session to actually talk about games rather than strategy and business, it was the stand-out session of the festival, particularly as those following were so weak: an ill-prepared panel on women in games and Eidos' Ian Livingstone vaguely discussing the principles of good character design (while shamelessly plugging new Eidos IP).



The event again took place in two contrasting venues: the steeply inclined lecture room of the Royal College of Physicians on the first day and the dark womb of an Odeon cinema on the second

In the last session the EIF **Edge** Award, voted for by five judges from eight nominees, was presented to Capcom for *Okami*. Unable to receive the award in person, Capcom sent a acceptance video featuring a grateful stuffed Ameratsu.

The next day was more successful, with the Odeon venue, busy with people attending public game screenings, adding a better sense of occasion. A typically slick session by Sony's London Studio (run on a PS3, no less) about Home and PS3 *SingStar* thoroughly explored why games need to embrace 'web 2.0' principles, a theme that many other sessions touched upon without properly addressing. A panel on administering virtual societies like *Second Life* and *Eve Online* was thoroughly interesting, if not particularly reflective of genuinely new issues facing MMOs. Another outing for *Second Life* probably stretched the festival's coverage of virtual worlds too far, though.

Ultimately, EIF 2007 was a victim of its own ambition to cover too wide a subject. With a sharper focus on games, culture and creativity, words referenced in its own mission statement, perhaps the festival would be more pertinent to the industry it claims to represent.



From left to right: Chris Deering, the festival chair; CCP CEO Hilmar Petursson; Peter Cowley, Endemol UK's director of interactive media; and Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot. The festival's eclectic line-up did much to lose its necessary focus

MOBILE

N-Gage reborn

Can Nokia deliver on its promise of an Xbox Live for phones?

With a claim that it will herald the next generation of mobile phone gaming, Nokia will be relaunching the N-Gage platform this autumn.

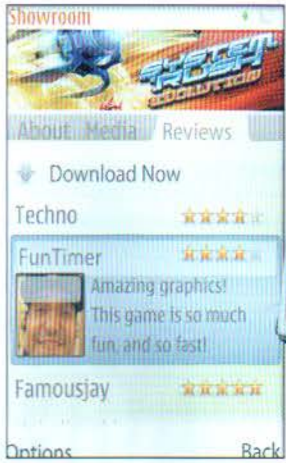
Following the ill-fated 2003 attempt to create a purpose-designed gaming phone, this endeavour will not be tied to a single model. Spread over multiple Series 60 Nokia handsets, N-Gage has become a gaming network, similar to Xbox Live.

It will award users with points for in-game achievements, and offer multiplayer, chat features and game downloads. "It will get more from games that play on mobile phones by making them genuinely mobile by being connected and social," claims **Martin O'Driscoll**, Nokia's business manager for games.

The service will allow users to download free demos that can be unlocked for the full version, and users will own a licence for each purchase, allowing them to download again for new handsets. The shop will also feature user reviews. Nokia's aim is to ensure that all games released on the platform will work well on N-Gage-affiliated phones and will certify each title released.

O'Driscoll says that many leading mobile game publishers and developers are already supporting the concept. The single platform, he claims, will significantly reduce the cost of development because much of the expense of creating mobile phone games is down to porting to multiple devices made by multiple manufacturers.

Nokia hasn't yet announced a final date for the rolling launch, but says that it plans to have over 30 in-house games ready in time.





Anxious that the platform is 'progressive', O'Driscoll says that no bars will be placed on the size of videogame downloads



Continue

Fanboy/girl passion
As seen at BlizzCon. This stuff cannot be bought

High scores
***Space Giraffe* ensures that office rivalry burns fiercely**

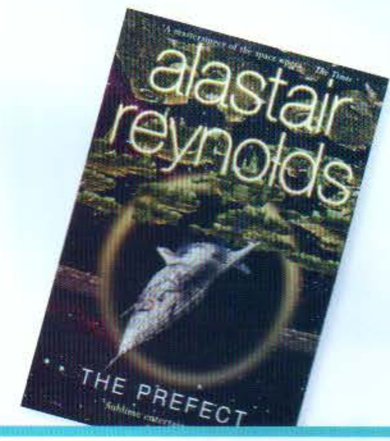
Game-inspired anime
Surely we only have to say: Kings of Power 4 Billion %!

Quit

Dell RAM
The Edge gaming PC takes an early retirement

Chilli sauce on biscuits
A cruel game of roulette equals fierce office burns

Fanboy/girl hygiene
We are going to invent *WarCraft*-brand deodorant



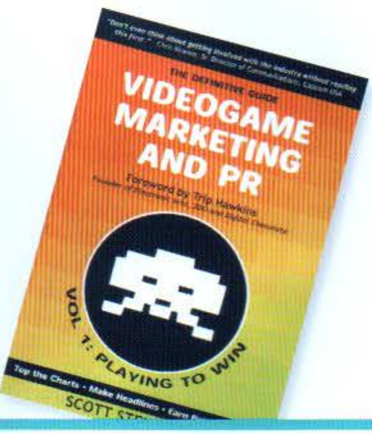
Author: Alastair Reynolds
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 9780575077164

THE PREFECT

Another visit to Reynolds' inventive hard sci-fi world uncovers a significant protagonist

A welcome return to his Revelation Space universe sees Alastair Reynolds' focus locked on to someone who could be considered his most complete character to date. The Prefect, Tom Dreyfus, has something of Inspector Rebus about him. But the fiercely independent lawman's flaws seem to be reinforced by more tragic events in his past. Not that his partners, hyperpig Sparver and rookie coder Thalia, have time enough to worry about the exact details. One of the 10,000 self-regulating worlds that make up the Glitter Band has been destroyed in what appears to be a hostile act carried out by the Ultras, an advanced civilisation with which 25th century humans have an uneasy peace. The difficult if routine investigation is thrown into context, however, as a routine patch for the computer voting system that underpins the entire system goes wrong.

Then ghosts of the past come creeping into the present as failed experiments in scanning human brains and first contact with mysterious entities that cause madness are revealed. It leaves Dreyfus and his boss Jane Aumonier, who's been trapped in a sleepless existence for a decade by a mechanism that's tapped into her spine, in a seemingly impossible situation, especially when the maker of her device is discovered to be at the bottom of things. By the end, it's only the steadfast nature of Dreyfus that keeps the increasingly convoluted plot on track. But cometh the hour, cometh the man. Let's hope his is not a one-time-only appearance.



Author: Scott Steinberg
Publisher: iUniverse
ISBN: 9780595433711

VIDEOGAME MARKETING AND PR

Guide to industry's black arts fails to make an impact

It's a fast-moving world, but the pace of some operators could make you feel like you're going backwards. Scott Steinberg seems to be one of those people. Turn your back and he's moved on to something else. So having just finished writing Videogame Marketing And PR, he's promptly sold his company, Embassy Multimedia Consultants – set up a mere 12 months ago – to online outfit Digital Trends. Other notches on the Steinberg belt include setting up the US version of Games Press, as well as stints at publishers such as DreamCatcher and Microids.

But back to Videogame Marketing And PR, which is officially pretitled 'The Definitive Guide', and there's the feeling it could be a case of less haste, more speed. Partly it's a case of the book being print-on-demand, which results in some rough presentational corners when it comes to things like word hyphenation. But more than this, you never really feel the slippery subjects of PR and marketing are ever pinned down in a satisfactory manner, let alone thrown into the sharp relief of seminal books on the subject such as David Ogilvy's Confessions Of An Advertising Man. Instead of digging down into the details of how he sold 75,000 copies of bedroom-developed boxing game *Heavyweight Thunder*, Steinberg's tendency is to drift through lists of platitudes such as 'focus on what you know best' and 'always ask questions'. It's not that such advice is wrong, just that it's not particularly useful, let alone definitive.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Boulder Dash – Rocks!
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** 10TACLE



It so does. Rockford's comeback trail leads from mobiles and PDAs to the dedicated handhelds, 10tacle promising 'innovative' new features, a sparkling visual makeover and multiplayer modes

Lego Indiana Jones
FORMAT: TBA **PUBLISHER:** LUCASARTS/TTGAMES



Once remarkable for its mere acceptance by Mr Lucas, TT's plastic parody becomes his latest revenue stream. *Lego Batman* wisely retreats into the shadows, meanwhile, to angrily wash his tights

Fire Pro Wrestling Returns
FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** AGETEC



Anyone for a bout of Electrified Barbed Wire Ropes Exploding Deathmatch? *Fire Pro* veterans know how significant a release this is, Agetec finally bringing the 2005 classic to western crowds

Company Of Heroes Online
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** THQ/SHANDA



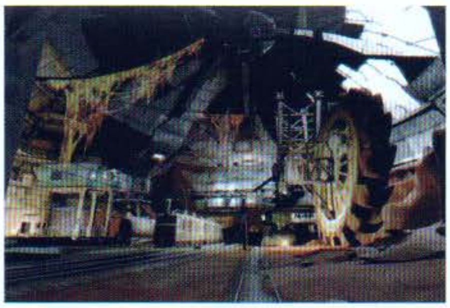
It must be a Taoist thing. The Chinese like playing with each other so much that they've yanked out the singleplayer and slipped in a host of co-op missions, competitive modes and persistent stats

Goku Makaimura Kai
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



As if to apologise for making *Ultimate Ghosts 'N Goblins* possible to complete, Capcom unveils its evil twin. Charged magic attacks, limited continues and new weapons are just some of the changes

Stalker: Clear Sky
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** THQ



With ambition rekindled by *Shadow Of Chernobyl*'s positive press, GSC ventures back into The Zone to clear up some backstory. New locations, enemies and freedoms await its well-deserved fanbase

Gears Of War
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT



Five new chapters suggest a PC version with a bit more length, higher resolutions, a rescaled HUD and generally superior visuals. 360's absentee The Brumak (pictured) is now the star of the show

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION

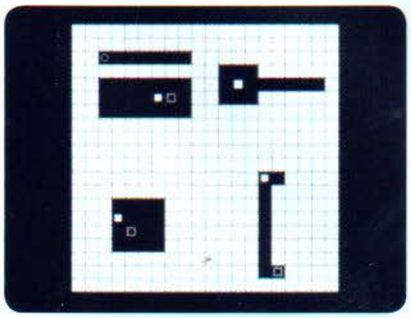


Just one more update, then, as it's QuakeCon time. Numerous tweaks prompted by the beta mean the Strogg straggler is set for September. We're hoping for a big splash with only minor damage

Avatar
FORMAT: TBA **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



Ten years in the making? Ten years in the procrastinating, more like. Ubisoft won't enjoy such a luxurious development time for its companion to James Cameron's movie: both are due in 2009



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
ReMaze

jayisgames.com/cgdc3_redirect.php?gameID=10

A frontrunner in Jayisgames.com's third Casual Game Design Competition, *ReMaze* is the latest from German comic artist and Flash designer Felix Reidl. Leaving behind the stylish silhouettes of *GunRun*, his rather fleeting take on *Contra* and *Metal Slug*, it's a maze puzzler which hides ever-increasing complexity beneath its simple tiles.

At first, it's as friendly to those who like to wind their way idly towards a solution as it is to more determined logicians. Each of its puzzles comprises up to four mazes, each with its own movable block and a choice of exits. A tap of the cursor moves all the blocks in unison, the idea being to complete every maze in sync, blocks reaching exits at the same time.

Walls are your immediate allies, allowing some blocks to move while keeping others in place. But as the levels progress, introducing deadly red blocks, fiendish layouts and selectively inverted controls, a rigorous approach becomes essential. Despite the lack of time limit or move counter, *ReMaze* is still a game that only a square could complete.



Sony's remodelled PSP was a key aspect of the PlayStation Premiere event, with areas dedicated to showing its TV-out capability (below), its TV tuner (bottom), and a special-edition package carrying *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII* branding (left)



SOMETHING ABOUT Japan



Game gatherings in the east and west

Famitsu's Koji Aizawa on conferences and the 'real' PS3 launch



Not so long ago, two important events took place: the US had E3, and Japan had the PlayStation Premiere. Both were different this time out, and both were full of the promise of more change.

A huge amount has been written about the difference in scale of E3 this year. This hasn't had much of an impact on the big platform holders like Nintendo, Sony or Microsoft: the attention focused on the big three is enormous, and the media would come anywhere from all over the world. It also didn't seem to have much of an influence on the major game makers like EA, who could afford to hold their own events pre-E3 and fly over the world's journalists. E3 getting smaller has had the biggest impact on the smallest game companies.

The main E3 event was staged in some airport hangars, just a little bigger than a high school. Nintendo or EA seemed to have no more than a dozen screens and demos running. It's nothing different in scale from an event you might happen across in a mall – which means it's far less expensive than any previous event, but also that fewer people are attending, something that weakens the event further.

There are many fewer products being presented, and because of this it's hard, if not impossible, to make an unexpected new discovery. Locations are relatively remote, and schedules are tight with all the conferences and the people you've made appointments to see. Attending and covering everything there is very challenging, especially when you want to spend more than ten minutes watching a PR presentation and go a little deeper.

At the moment, it's Sony that is losing ground in Japan. Since the Worldwide Studio has been put in place, the number of titles designed specifically for the Japanese market has diminished and the market seems to have done the same

How did Famitsu do, then? Well, apart from the platform holders with their announcements, and the very big software publishers, we had to prepare the coverage of the other companies very far in advance indeed. So, Famitsu had to visit them before E3.

You might not think it, but one of those other companies was Ubisoft. This is one of the world's largest game publishers, with some ambitious titles like *Assassin's Creed* making a lot of people excited. But it's no secret that these games have a hard time appealing to the Japanese market. The name of Ubisoft doesn't have the same impact in Japan as it does overseas where it's a strong brand. Our approach to Ubisoft's Japanese branch garnered a very positive response, and we got invitations to conferences, interview opportunities and hands-on time with some of their upcoming games. For obvious reasons, Weekly Famitsu can't always fit everything in, and so this is where Famitsu.com was able to show its own strengths and take the baton with some extensive coverage. Back at E3, it was much harder to get an interview that hadn't been arranged through multiple channels beforehand, and at the same time harder to make any surprise discoveries. At least, this is how I felt about the new E3, but I know there were other opinions: regardless, it is clear that there are many improvements to be made before next year.

Now, on to the PlayStation Premiere event which took place after E3. It's now a tradition for Sony to hold a meeting at this time of the year, and this time the company at least came equipped with all the necessary HD equipment to show off their







The PlayStation Premiere event was followed by the 13th edition of Sony's own PlayStation Awards, presented by SCE chief Kaz Hirai, who handed out gongs to the likes of Sega's Toshihiro Nagoshi (left), whose *Ryu Ga Gotoku* (aka *Yakuza*) series has sold over 500,000 copies per instalment in Japan











Finally, at the PlayStation Premiere event, attendees got to see how *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots* will actually play, thanks to a demonstration headed up by Hideo Kojima

wares to the audience. The event was scheduled to take about two hours, but lasted for more like three and a half, as Sony presented its line-up of PS3 titles and also the new version of the PSP. Compared to the very average conference SCE offered at E3, this PlayStation Premiere was much more impressive. Up to 40 titles were shown for the PS3, even if a lot of them were multi-platform, and extensions for the new version of the PSP, including a digital TV tuner, went down well. Of course, the key moment in a sense was Hideo Kojima's live and good-humoured demonstration of *Metal Gear Solid 4* for the PS3, which looked quite something. But no price cut for the console was announced: some could argue that the current offering has already had its price cut, thanks to a bundle featuring *Minna No Golf 5* which has just gone on sale in Japan. Maybe this is why there were no further cuts announced at the meeting. But today, the situation of the PS3 looks similar to that of the very first Xbox: one year after its official launch, the 'real' launch is about to take place. That was the message from this meeting in Japan.

There was a presentation of Home for the PlayStation Network, a first in Japan. It's very difficult to make judgements on whether it will work or not, but we know now the Japanese will have a customised version based around their cultural tastes. From the Japanese perspective, which is very much focused on animation and manga, I don't think Home can expect to be a nail in the coffin of the Xbox 360 if it can't incorporate that in some way into the design of the avatars.

And, at the moment, it's Sony that is losing ground in Japan. Since the Worldwide Studio has been put in place, the number of titles designed specifically for the Japanese market has diminished and so the Japanese market seems to have done the same thing. It seems that Sony has noticed that changes have taken place, not all of them for the best, and more may be on the way. Watching anything change is painful, but ultimately it's often for the better. Will this be case for Sony and E3? As ever, frustratingly, only time will tell.

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

The Orange Box



A box of delights, more like. The big question is where to start – slapstick multiplayer? Mind-bending spatial puzzling? Finding out what Freeman's been up to?
360, PC, PS3, VALVE/EA

Infamous



OK, so it's not a next-generation *Sly Cooper*, but we've overcome that enough now to find the prospect of a darker-themed *Crackdown* a captivating one.
PS3, SCEE

Left 4 Dead



We're eagerly anticipating this reinvention of the zombie shooter, hoping for dark streets haunted by terror and the unrelenting pressure of the sprinting dead.
360, PC, VALVE

The social dimension

How can MMO creators make their worlds richer?



Richard Garriott claims that *Tabula Rasa* is the solution to the problems he sees with MMOs. But whether it achieves his aims or not doesn't necessarily relate to whether it will be successful as an online world

Richard Garriott has a lot of problems with MMOs. They don't tell meaningful stories, their basic game design is more about statistics than interaction, and the life in those virtual worlds is dead, with fields of monsters there for nothing but harvesting, NPCs crudely waiting to deal out quests or act as shops.

Taken at face value, and compared to singleplayer games, these criticisms are damning. And, indeed, many MMO players will report how weary they are of the pursuits that form their nuts and bolts, while many people who don't play them will express their disdain of such tiresome pursuits.

But absent from Garriott's critique were the other human players in these worlds. When you hear stories about the likes of *World Of WarCraft*, they're rarely about the game itself. They're about the trials and pleasures of playing with other people – raids on cities, guild politics and beating high-level bosses as teams.

That's because MMOs are about more than the stories their designers have written and the game designs that knit their worlds together. They're about the crucial element that makes them different from offline, solo games: other players. And part of the reason why *WOW* is so successful is that it allows space for its players to interact without its narrative and design getting in the way of them.

Garriott's championing of more engaging, more immersive online worlds is all very well, but whether *Tabula Rasa* will also be able to support its players' more personal stories remains to be seen.

This isn't to say that MMO design cannot be improved upon – certainly, the *WOW* model, for all its success, is rife with problems like the dull pressure of level grind. But perhaps MMO makers should look at the social elements that make them unique in videogames, rather than solo games, to inform the way they develop from here on.

As Jeff Strain suggests in our interview on p16, social interaction is tied to the diversity of things people can do in an environment, so MMO designers should be thinking more about adding more for players to do in their worlds than just adding more stuff to see and acquire. So instead of complex backstories to make their worlds more absorbing, perhaps they could create richer tools for players to write their own.







FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 15**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

Army Of Two

In which two attempt to be an entire company



Army Of Two's world is, unsurprisingly, bifurcated. On one side it is set in the murky environment of private military contractors, global organisations that often operate with political immunity, avoiding the Geneva Conventions altogether in the pursuit of cash. At the same time, the dev team have obviously been watching a lot of big-grossing films and duly incorporated 'buddy moments' and a great deal of Hollywood shorthand.

Both are in danger of corrupting each other. Developer EA Montreal may claim that the game is politically charged, for example, but the environments and enemies are little more than caricatures – levels include the 'Caves of Afghanistan', where walls have pictures of Saddam Hussein painted on them and suicide bombers strapped with dynamite run screaming at your position. As for the 'buddy moments', if constantly shouting 'bro!', 'shit!' and 'fuck!' is how friends communicate, then this is a title with enormous attention to detail.



without climbing up or roll a grenade into a gun emplacement. New tricks include co-op sniping, where the screen splits into three: the top section shows your usual thirdperson view, while the bottom section shows your sniper's sight on one half and your partner's on the other, meaning that you can easily line up shots that complement each other and don't waste bullets.

Levels include the 'Caves of Afghanistan', where walls have pictures of Saddam Hussein painted on them and suicide bombers strapped with dynamite run screaming at you





The strength of *Army Of Two* lies less in the basic mechanics of play, which are nothing new, than in the occasional set-piece which crops up – and, occasionally, some unscripted co-op moments that change your battle focus

The concept behind the engine is more impressive – the claim being that it's impossible to play as a lone wolf, and lead designer Chris Ferreira going as far as saying that the co-op interactions were built before a single gun was incorporated. There are some nice rethinkings of the standards: lifting your partner over a wall, for example, is a fixed animation but one that allows the bottom partner to control the height of the boost, allowing the top partner to fire over

But although EA Montreal is trying to move away from canned animations and pre-packed attacks, the melee moves are exactly that. You press the button and, according to the relative position of your enemy, one of several animations begins that will take a few seconds. In such a fast-paced game it's a tiny but noticeable lull, and allows any other enemies to easily begin circling you for the kill. Perhaps this is the point, but among all the similarities to the likes of *Gears Of War*,



The above location is parachuted into, with one partner controlling the parachute and dodging rockets, while the other snipes ground targets



The aggrometer in action – one partner drawing the attention of the helicopter while the other looks to hit its exposed weak points





The developers claim the scenery is interactive and can be used to your advantage, but why do they never show anything except car doors?



this is one area that at the moment is noticeably weak.

Army Of Two has other influences, however, beyond the obvious *Gears* comparisons. The 'aggrometer' is straight from MMOs and allows one of the two to attract enemies by, essentially, firing lots and being loud. This partner will gain a distinctive red tinge and enemies will focus their fire on him as the greater threat, while the other will turn transparent and be able to sneak around enemy positions and encampments and begin causing havoc from there. It's a sure way to give one partner time to lay a trap or



Cutscenes break up the action, but a great deal of the communication between your team and their paymasters is via radio. Surprisingly, they sound like Fenix and co

a key item, and is a definite tactical step up from other console team-based shooters. Juggling the attention of your foes works effectively, but unfortunately they're also very good at turning their attention into heavy fire on your position, so it has to be managed carefully.

Those enemies come in three main categories that are colour coded: grunts, elites and heavies. The grunts are idiots, and need to be guided around and told what to do by the elites, who are better shots and obviously more battlefield-savvy. The heavies are covered in thick forward-facing armour, but by using the aggrometer one of you can sneak around to their exposed rears. In combat, the foes threaten to prove a bigger handful than the Locust ever did, thanks mainly to their constant attempts to flank you and move from location to location: while this does mean that you can pick them off as they run across the open, there are also panic-inducing moments as three enemies run at you from different directions.

Luckily, your guns can be upgraded into mighty cannons that will send foes flying backwards. 'Pimping' your weapon allows sections such as the barrel or the cartridge to be customised, and the system has a certain amount of balance in that simply buying the most expensive equipment won't necessarily mean that you have the ideal type of gun – it may be too inaccurate and power-heavy, or the reload time may be too long because the clip's so big. Online, your gun will be the only identifying visual element of your character, and you can also exchange with your partner. However, the game comes with only a single alternative skin for your £50, while containing multiple empty docks designed for downloadable content.

Army Of Two initially feels clumsy, vacillating between action and strategy, the real and the virtual. But after some time spent with the game it shows its own imaginative touches, and regardless it shouldn't be taken at anything other than face value: it's for the person who loved *Gears Of War* and wants this season's equivalent, the videogame industry's Die Hard 4.0. For that market it will do its job well, and with some conviction.

Bad sanitation

***Army Of Two*'s occasional oscillations between real-world fidelity and gaming shorthand can be schizophrenic, and one particular aspect that shows this is the healing mechanism for your first knockdown. EA Montreal says that the reason for incorporating tampons is that they are genuinely used as battlefield dressings, and a consultant had told them about their use in genuine mercenary operations: both are undoubtedly true, and the inspiration behind their use. In practice, a QTE begins, a big white tampon appears onscreen and begins filling up with blood while squishy sounds come from your partner's wounds. The game doesn't feel this need for 'authenticity' beyond the surface (after all, your character's health is rechargeable in cover) and it comes across as little more than an attempt to create an easy 'Have you seen it?' gaming moment, something that slightly devalues the obvious hard work that has gone into the rest of the experience.**



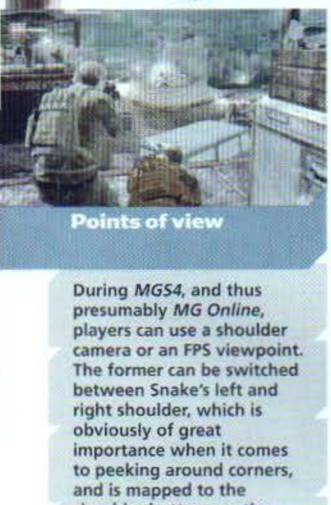




Metal Gear Online

Because sometimes one new instalment in a long-running franchise just isn't enough

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**



Points of view

During *MGS4*, and thus presumably *MG Online*, players can use a shoulder camera or an FPS viewpoint. The former can be switched between Snake's left and right shoulder, which is obviously of great importance when it comes to peeking around corners, and is mapped to the shoulder buttons on the Sixaxis. As well as this, Kojima emphasised that the environments are designed to provide vantage points and an advantage to prepared opponents, such that Snake will often face fire from unseen positions – but when an enemy can't be seen, he has a thermal imaging camera in his eyepatch to identify their location. These were nice touches, but the thirdperson camera has some 'dramatic' changes which could prove very annoying and will hopefully be excised, and (of particular importance to *MGO*) weapon-changing remains menu-driven and thus rather ponderous.

Yet more details of the upcoming *MGS4* have been released, but the most surprising is surely that it has essentially turned into two games. **Hideo Kojima** has never made a secret out of the fact that he wanted to make an online game, but despite teasing with alternative concepts, his only work in the area has been on *Metal Gear*. Both *MGS3* and *MGS: Portable Ops* featured limited online modes, and inspired some hope for *MGS4*'s use of the permanently connected PS3. The latter now seems like an irrelevance, following the unexpected announcement of the standalone prospect, *Metal Gear Online*.

MG Online is based on the world, 3D engine and character interactions developed for *MGS4* – and the details make it clear that the online side of *MGS4* has evolved into this separate title. The game will involve up to 16 players working with and against each other, and a Konami press statement has made a point of a team system that will link your nanomachines to your comrades' – in practice, this means that you and your team can easily share information such as the whereabouts of foes, although this can also be hacked by opponents.

The *MGS4* demo at the recent PlayStation Premiere showed it to be extremely detailed and a genuine progression for the series, although the emphasis (as in *MGS3*) is on a linear series of sequences that can be solved in a large variety of ways. Kojima said that the game is "about freedom given to players to move undetected between two factions at war, and choose whether to take one side or go up against both." There are thus the obvious consequences of killing soldiers from one particular faction, but this also suggests that side-missions will play a larger part in the game than expected.

The only worrying aspects of *MGS4* are gimmicky moments which will hopefully be isolated rather than crucial elements. Oil drums, for example, can be used to hide inside, but also to roll into enemies – which makes Snake nauseous, so he examines bikini magazines to settle his stomach; the PS3 hardware's graphical grunt has been used to render each page of the magazine readable, and they can be flicked through at your leisure. Such quirks are usual with *Metal Gear*, however – of more consequence is Snake's movement, a mixture of set animations, such as rolls and crawls, and fluid, context-sensitive actions. Some moves are undeniably neat: there's the one-button camo action of his suit, which blends into certain backgrounds; he can simulate death; he can hide in garbage, but may begin to stink and attract flies. Enemies also seem much more realistic, dying easily from one or two shots, while there is a distinct lack of obtrusive text, with conversations ongoing as Snake moves around.

But as *MGS4* takes a more definite shape, *MGO* is still an unknown quantity. *MGS3* online at least showed that the *Metal Gear* interface could handle its own brand of hectic deathmatches, but *MGO* must stand alone. Perhaps the real question is whether it will be a retail release or made available as a download to owners of *MGS4*. Either way, in dividing one of PlayStation 3's most anticipated titles, Kojima Productions has set itself a doubly tough task.



As well as the gameplay footage, there was a repeat of the E3 trailer which caused some histrionics, with Raiden and returning baddie Vamp indulging in some highly daft fighting. As well as this, Meryl makes a return as a member of Foxhound – as always, Snake's in the middle



The environments are deathmatch versions of some of the levels in *MGS4* – the blue camo effect seems to indicate nanomachine crossover. It works as an identifying mark around your team members, and can be seen through walls





Life's full of tough moral choices: whether to rocket the plane out of the sky, or climb into a tank and do it from there. The tank-stealing animation itself is worth seeing, but the QTEs triggered every time you hijack will surely prove annoying after repeated use



Mercenaries 2: World In Flames

Proof that money can buy you everything, after all

As the release of *Mercenaries 2* comes ever closer, a new hands-on preview shows that there are a few clouds on the (destructible) horizon. There's certainly nothing wrong with the game from a technical or visual standpoint – everything collapses in a chunky, crumbly manner and looks reasonably authentic while it does so. Perhaps it's more that the game is devoted purely to destruction, and the world of *Mercenaries 2* has obviously been built to be destroyed. At times, it feels more like you're facing dominos than houses.

Of course, the destruction works as it should, and sometimes spectacularly so: bridge supports can be taken out, trees can be burned, houses can be blown out and entire towns can be flattened with airstrikes. But perhaps there's an overriding sense of ennui: despite the bigger bangs, bigger crashes and bigger draw distance, it's all just a little familiar. That's not to say there isn't the odd new element in the mix: one of the new tricks demonstrated is a helicopter picking up a truck using a magnetic winch – a highly pleasing sight in itself, but even more so for the robust physics when the truck is eventually dropped from a great height on to the slope of a mountain, and tumbles down, before (of course) some gratuitous missiles blow it to the heavens.

Around the gameworld are five different factions that can be either friends or enemies, depending on your actions within the game and the missions you choose to accept. Pandemic claims that the story is much improved over the original, but none of this has been seen, and the brief outlines provided (the plot revolving around your merc not getting paid for a job, being shot in the bottom, and then taking out his or her revenge) don't inspire confidence in the 'Bruckheimer-meets-Tarantino' promises. Objectives will revolve around the main plot, but outside of this the game will be based around the smaller skirmishes and jobs that can be picked up on the fly and fulfilled at your merc's convenience. Of the five factions, the usual suspects are in force, as well as the People's Liberation Army of Venezuela and major oil companies, all of which have their own vehicles and political angle on events within the gameworld.

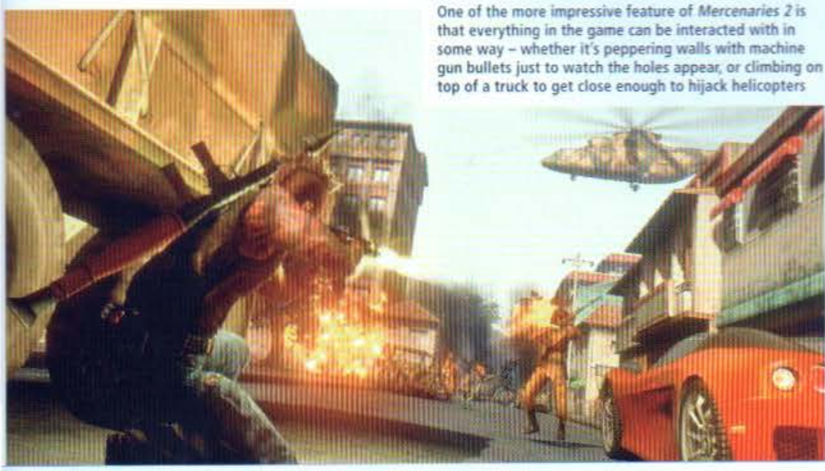
Venezuela was chosen as the location for *Mercenaries 2* for this political dimension (the game loosely focuses on a struggle over oil, of which Venezuela is one of the biggest exporters) but also to make the world more colourful than the often flat locations of the original. It's certainly more attractive than the previous game, with some bright greens and blues reminiscent of *Just Cause*, and the sheer scale of it can be highly impressive – and your binoculars are genuinely useful for plotting trails of destruction.

It's hard to be too critical of *Mercenaries 2* because there's a lot of possibility within its sandbox, and doubtless a lot of fun in simple, gratuitous explosions. But perhaps the thing about doing everything purely for money is that, by definition, you can't allow yourself to care too much.





The faction sideplots bring some personality to the environments, and your actions within those zones will have some impact on the visuals of an area. You also have your own mansion HQ in which to kick back



One of the more impressive feature of *Mercenaries 2* is that everything in the game can be interacted with in some way – whether it's peppering walls with machine gun bullets just to watch the holes appear, or climbing on top of a truck to get close enough to hijack helicopters

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **PANDEMIC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2007**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E163, E179**



The poor little brother

The producer of the new-generation title is keen to emphasise that the PS2 version of *Mercenaries 2* will be far more than a poor port of its bigger brother. In practice, however, it's currently not bearing that out – massive fog surrounding almost every aspect of the world is only one of many problems, alongside leaden movement and dull enemy AI. The biggest problem, however, is in the emphasis on destructible environments, which the PS2 simply can't handle beyond a certain level of complexity: if you hit a smokestack with a rocket launcher, then regardless of the site of impact the destruction animation will always be the same and begin from the same impact point. It's doubtful the game will see release in anything like its current state.





The addition of bikes has helped bring the vehicle total to over 120, the manufacturers including Maserati and Chevrolet, with bikes from Ducati, BMW and Honda to name a few



Project Gotham Racing 4

First came the detail, now comes the colour. Bizarre's photorealism-chasing racer is back

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BIZARRE CREATIONS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

In *Metropolis Street Racer*, even a perfect race could lose you Kudos. Your technical driving would be marvellous, your cornering clinical and your time extraordinary, yet still you'd fail the ultimate test. Of showmanship.

PGR3, for all its excellence, failed that test as well. In arriving on time and in working order for the launch of Xbox 360, it lost a little something en route. Call it a sense of danger, perhaps, or flamboyance – things which *PGR4* is returning to the series with evident passion.

Now that the twists and turns of 360 development are more fully understood, Bizarre's attention is turning back to that original *MSR* motto: it's not how fast you drive, but about how you drive fast. Hence the unexpected debut of motorbikes on its streets, ridden by characters who express themselves both technically and physically.

Wheelies, endos and powerslides are all possible on these new licensed vehicles, as are gestures to both the crowds and other drivers, triggered by an unspecified 'Stunt Button'. Such risks carry the reward of Kudos points, of course, the balance of opportunity between cars and bikes sustained by the game's animation system. Only after a hairpin, for example, can a rider wiggle his backside back on to the seat.

Bikers, says Bizarre, are this game's superstars, but that doesn't mean it's begun discriminating when it comes to online fame. There's still Gotham TV, cleverer now than in *PGR3* with racers grouped by nationality, pitted against each other in organised global competitions. Bizarre has realised its duties as a promoter, it seems, as well as a facilitator. Thanks to a new feature called PGR On Demand, players can access any race that's ever occurred online whenever they choose, however long after the event that is.

Gotham TV could still turn into just a glorified replay system, of course, especially if Microsoft doesn't lend some weight in terms of long-term publicity. But what a game to be replayed. The list of venues now totals a nice round ten, those of the previous game joining Macau, Shanghai, St Petersburg, Quebec and a fictional Michelin Test Track, which unlike *PGR2*'s plays a role in both single and multiplayer events.

It's a reassuring list, in no way shy of the world's less orthodox road layouts. Those were always *PGR*'s most interesting, painfully absent from its last instalment. Early looks at *PGR4* have shown a much greater range of elevations within tracks, hopefully meaning hills to rival those of *PGR2*'s San Francisco. And given a spot of rain or snow (see 'Thunder road'), this will surely bring back something Bizarre's series desperately needs: the inherent, intoxicating danger of racing on the high street.





While riders are unlikely to fall from their bikes as the result of nudges or intimidations – this isn't *MotorStorm*, after all – dismounts are still possible. Gambling for extra Kudos points looks certain to be the most common cause





PGR3's sense of city/road disconnection appears to have been resolved, but bike handling carries a question mark



Thunder road

As if Bizarre didn't have enough on its plate with expanding *PGR*'s world and bringing bikes into the equation, *PGR4*'s dynamic weather system is more than a mere novelty. Not only do raindrops on vehicle windscreens refract the world beyond, and puddles gather over time, but damp conditions encourage fog to collect according to altitude. Head- and street lamps are then diffused, the result being a more compelling suggestion of reality than you'd find in merely dry conditions. The weather serves a larger purpose, of course, enabling both cars and bikes to aquaplane for added Kudos, risking a wild drift incurring the wrath of an improved damage model.

Open-wheeled cars can't weather the same amount of contact as the panel-shod tourers: drivers employing the same physical tactics to gain positions are likely to find themselves pointing backwards and missing vital parts







The gMotor2 engine may be beginning to look rough around the edges, but Simbin is hoping that its team's legendary attention to detail will be the biggest draw

RACE '07

An updated and well upholstered model in need of a new engine

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **SIMBIN**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **2007**

It was always going to be a hard act to follow. After the runaway success of the implausibly detailed yet gloriously dramatic *GTR2*, Simbin would find it hard to concoct that perfect tonic of realism, recognisable marques and close, fraught competition with a new racing series. Rather than chasing ever-greater performance figures, the team instead focused on the world of door-handle abuse that is touring car racing. *RACE* received a mixed reception – fans claimed it evoked the halcyon days of *TOCA 2*, prior to what many saw as the dilution of the series, but critics claimed that the two-litre engines simply weren't fast enough to thrill.

RACE '07 is an attempt to broaden the franchise beyond the championship at its core. Any complaints regarding the variety or alacrity of the vehicles on offer should be answered in this seasonal update with a complement of powerful support classes, including rear-wheel-drive open-wheelers such as F3000 and Formula BMW. Vehicles that actively cling to the road and can't withstand anything more than the slightest contact require a markedly different approach to car control and cornering – something that promises to refresh, if not revolutionise, the racing experience.



The WTCC still receives the premier treatment, with the game interface mimicking the television coverage Eurosport provides. The channel, pleased with the previous game, has renewed and strengthened its support



The excuse that circuits are often situated in barren tracts of land no longer washes. Simbin has upped trackside detail and added 3D spectators to improve atmosphere

As in the previous instalment, the circuits are taken from the WTCC calendar and this time both the 2006 and 2007 seasons are simulated. The series, as with many forms of motorsport, is making a conscious movement towards street circuits, so there is some dicey racing in the offing – particularly on new additions Porto and Pau.

The potential snag in this heady petrol-based cocktail is the visuals. With the benchmark recently set by *Dirt*, the gMotor2 engine that powered last year's *GTR2* is beginning to show its age. Simbin has tweaked the models and circuits to suit contemporary hardware, and increased the sensation of speed, but whether the graphical fidelity will be enough to capture the public's imagination is another matter.

For the simulation crowd, this is less of a priority. With the ex-mod team's roots firmly entrenched in the online racing community, the game has several features designed specifically for the hardcore's often exacting demands. The game comes with support for custom liveries, to allow sim-racing teams to personalise their vehicles for competition in online racing leagues, which are becoming increasingly popular. Another addition that will please the lap-time fetishists is the introduction of Xbox Live-inspired world rankings. Simulation fans are always keen to compare themselves to the best in the world, and shaving last few tenths of a second off of their lap times and submitting the times to the leaderboard is likely to become something of an obsession.

Attempting to take on the might of the *Race Driver* series with a wealth of new content is admirable for a young dev team, and as long as Simbin retains its focus on detailed handling and a slavish adherence to the sport, *RACE '07* could exceed its engine and become essential in a way that its predecessor never managed.



Home advantage

One circuit in the game won't be familiar to even the most hardened motorsport fans. Vara is a small municipality in Sweden and home to Simbin's design studios. The team decided to design a street circuit based around the town, with the pits based in a supermarket car park. The circuit may be fictional for the time being, but Simbin has been in discussions with the Swedish motorsport authority and it has expressed some interest in the layout. It's unlikely that an event on the town's streets will ever come to fruition, but if it did it would certainly be one of the first examples of a real sport taking its cues from a game design team.



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **LIONHEAD**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Fable 2

Lionhead's ambitious sequel plays up the horrors of war







According to Molyneux, these screenshots represent "60 per cent" of where Lionhead intends to be with the final game. Additional quality is likely to arrive via shaders rather than drastic changes in geometry

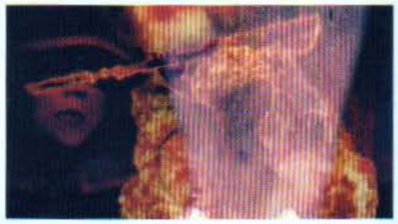
"People," claims Lionhead co-founder **Peter Molyneux**, "hate that they're getting ugly," referencing the urge that he believes will make gamers care for one of the key innovations in *Fable 2*: the way your character's face can become scarred when you fall in battle. Over time, he says, it's possible to take on a frankly scary appearance, with twisted tissue details on your head, arms and torso, to the point that even your wife (yes, the sequel is continuing in its quest for believable relationships) may look aghast on your return from action and ask: "What happened to your face?"

It will be possible to 'buy' your way out of becoming scarred at all (though we rather suspect that most players will be happy to bear a couple, if only for 'personality'), but the better option, clearly, is to prevent the cause of such unpleasantness, and *Fable 2*'s combat system is intended to put you very much at an advantage by being simple to handle but flexible enough to afford you a stack of attacking and defending options.

And that's simple to the tune of requiring only one button – X – to pull off any and all fighting manoeuvres in the game, from simple sword thrusts and blocks to more complicated actions, such as picking up a bottle and throwing it at an enemy. (Magic and firearms attacks will also use a one-button system, with similar flexibility.) We ask Molyneux what happens when you intend to crack a foe's head with your sword but are forced to pick up a bottle instead. That just won't happen, he promises. Clearly we'll need to test this ourselves.







Like many games in development right now, *Fable 2* makes use of depth-of-field effects, which help to focus your attention before encounters commence (centre)



FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **MONOLITH**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2008**

Condemned 2: Bloodshot

Can Monolith out-Rockstar Rockstar? The evidence mounts in this super-brutal actioner

Though it was far from a failure, the original *Condemned*'s status as an Xbox 360 launch title meant that is was a rush job, with corners cut and cracks papered over in order to 'hit its window'. The follow-up has been given more room to breathe, and Monolith seems to have taken this opportunity to really put some time and effort into crafting the most skin-crawlingly gory and violent game since *Manhunt 2*.

Examples, then. You can throw a bottle of whiskey at an enemy's head to smash it and cover him in alcohol, then push him into a naked flame and see him furiously ignite. You can grapple an enemy, put him into an arm lock, then continue pushing the limb in a direction in which it simply wasn't designed to move until it crunchingly snaps. You can enter a 'hobo flight club' mode and kill an unlimited supply of tramps in an effort to gain a placing on a dedicated leaderboard.

The gruesomeness of it all hits home thanks to the quality of its graphics, which really come to life thanks to some supremely convincing lighting effects.

Like its forebear, though, *Condemned 2* isn't without some strategic depth, and again you are given tools with which to investigate many grisly scenes, but with many new (albeit optional) opportunities for detective work (is the victim's visible wound an entry or exit point? Was the body dragged or carried to this point, or did the victim crawl?).

It's all wrapped up in a story likely to keep you on your toes, if not just plain confused, with shocks enough to match the impact of the woozy violence.



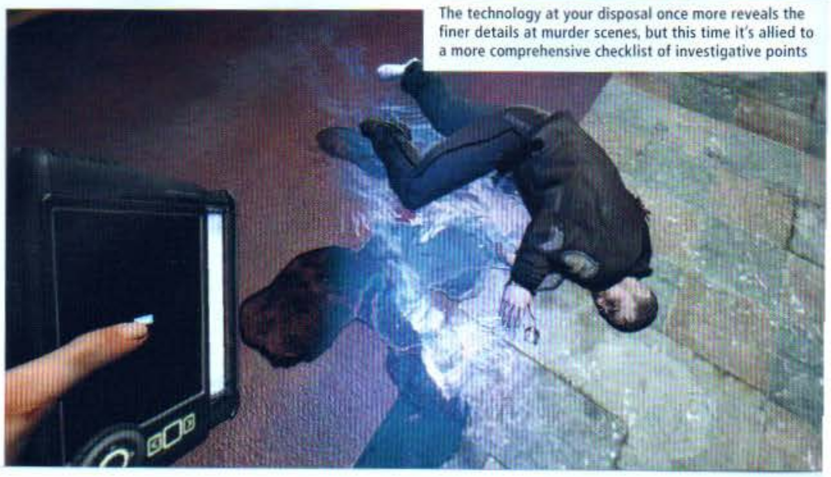


The game uses an entirely new combat system, allowing for punches to be thrown as crosses, jabs and uppercuts. Sometimes, though, it will make more sense to get busy with a length of pipe





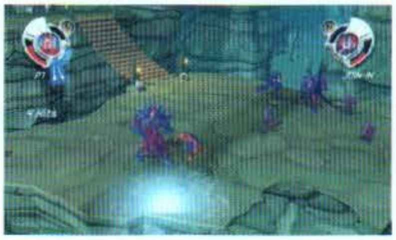
The technology at your disposal once more reveals the finer details at murder scenes, but this time it's allied to a more comprehensive checklist of investigative points





The plot revolves around someone finding a way to make lots of symbiotes (below), hence their ubiquity in the game – but the fun to be had tossing them around is gone after a few minutes, even with metal arms (left)





The levels are occasionally good to look at, but too often drab and devoid of anything remarkable in the way of colour or incident. They typically involve beating up a lot of enemies, unlocking a door or raising a bridge, and then repeating those actions in the same environment again

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **NEXT LEVEL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **Q4 2007**

Spider-Man: Friend Or Foe

With great power comes great responsibility to actually do justice to the licence. Anyone?

Oh dear. It shouldn't be like this. Those expecting some sort of quality redress for *Spider-Man 3* from *Spider-Man: FOF* will be disappointed. This intellectual property is being pumped until it bursts, resulting in one of the most uninspired games we've seen for a while.

Visually, it stands up quite well. The character models are chunky and brightly coloured (though quite distinct from the rendered cutscenes), while some of the levels have a distinctive identity. The animations for your varied moves have a solidity to them and throw your enemies around with some abandon, occasionally hitting a sweet spot and scattering multiple foes.





But *Spider-Man: FOF* is built around this most basic of mechanics: enemy walk to you, enemy get pounded. There is room on the market for a simple but well-executed beat 'em up – the longing for a spiritual successor to the likes of *Streets Of Rage* is ongoing. But this isn't it. Reams of exactly the same character models walk towards you and your partner, each level producing a slightly different variation of the skins but, crucially, no difference whatsoever to the tactics. The mid-level bosses even use the same attacks as each other, with minor variations. It is, quite simply, a case of moving around a little and mashing some buttons for exactly the same attacks over and over again on foes that look and feel more or less the same.

This is the most fundamental problem with *Friend Or Foe*, and it ruins the experience. Scores of indistinguishable opponents may have been inevitable many moons ago, but they're not now. Using the power of Xbox 360 and PS3 to simply pretty up some environments and offer a few more selectable characters is pointless when the basic game facing the player is something that was being done in a more varied and inventive manner a decade ago.

The levels shown aren't pieces of inspired design, although some effort has been made to make the locations tiered, and thus you'll be moving up and down, in and out, as well as left to right. But fundamentally very little is done with this, and locations possess that most infuriating of obstacles, the 'bottomless pit' surrounding the play area. Thus, if you stray beyond your bounds, Spider-Man or the other character (see 'Bring a friend') fall off the screen and die instantly. A double-jump means this happens relatively rarely, but setting platform obstacles in a game that obviously isn't designed as a platformer, and doesn't have the basics right, seems daft.

It could be claimed that *Spider-Man: FOF* is being designed for children and should be treated as such. And yet that presumes that children are undiscerning, and that any content produced for them can be simply cranked out, but cross-generational appeal is a balancing act the comics have managed for 40 years, so there's no excuse here. There is yet time before release, but the build we've played seemed reasonably complete, so we don't expect a dramatic increase in the game's quality. Spider-Man, one of the greatest comic-book heroes, a personality as well as a pugilist, shouldn't be left twisting in the wind like this.





Bring a friend

One of the more impressive aspects of *Friend Or Foe* is its character roster, which is sizeable and includes many comic-book favourites. These are unlocked as you move through the levels, either by finding them at the end of a section or by defeating them in battle. These encounters are often the best moments, but not enough to save the game from the tedium of the remainder. When unlocked, Spider-Man's comrades can overshadow him in certain respects, with Doctor Octopus in particular proving lethal, and each of them has their own well-crafted battle animations and special moves – but all moves basically amount to variations on a theme.



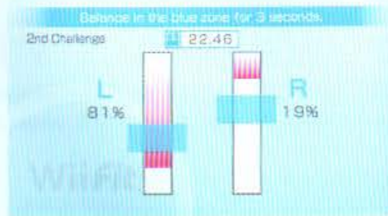
In later levels, some of the larger robots can knock down your health quite easily – but Spidey's moves can be upgraded





You have to be fully aware of your centre of gravity for heading (left), as your Mii will only move when that has, while the yoga exercises tell you when you're losing your balance or distributing weight in your feet wrongly







The balance game (above) involves distributing your weight effectively, but the blue rectangles decrease with each round while your feet still have to stay in position for three seconds, cueing much desperate arm-waving

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2007 (JAPAN), Q1 2008 (US, UK)**

Wii Fitness

Nintendo helps you to find a balance

It's usually not difficult to work out whether something should be in the pages of **Edge** or in the pages of a lifestyle magazine. And then there's *Wii Fitness* (*Wii Fit* in non-EU territories) – in many ways the current highlight of an inexorable movement by Nintendo towards non-gamers, but also the first major game to not be a game in a very real sense.

Make no mistake – the stylings may be classic Nintendo, from the Miis to the cheerful, clear menus, but this is as far from platforms as you can get. Several of the activities are fun, but it's as a by-product. This isn't *Dance Dance Revolution*, or even *Wii Sports*, where any physical benefits are a side-effect of playing the game. This is gaming as a side-effect of physical benefits. *Wii Fitness* will calculate your BMI, take you through a core fitness regime to determine your 'Wii Fitness Level', and then personalise your aerobics regime. It will make you stretch and pull and rotate, the only reward being your own perspiration (and, ideally, fitness).

There have been forerunners in the field of 'exergaming', notably *Yourself Fitness* and *EyeToy Kinetic*, but the presentation of *Wii Fitness* puts it in a different league. Presentation may not seem to be a particularly important aspect of a game, but *Wii Fitness* is designed to be a family accessory within a health-conscious society, and the clear, simple interface and neutral colour schemes are perfect for this. It even has that Wii trademark of personification: 'Don't step on me yet', it'll say, before: 'OK, I'm ready, you can step on me now'. Every aspect of the game, from the title to the demonstrations therein, has an element of practicality to it.

Part of this utilitarian quality is the balance board. It's a very chunky piece of equipment, reminiscent of an elongated set of bathroom scales, and feels extremely heavyweight: it takes the most robust pressure and activity without any problems. Your shoes should be removed before stepping on, and both of the foot sections have a very slightly dimpled surface for comfort and grip.

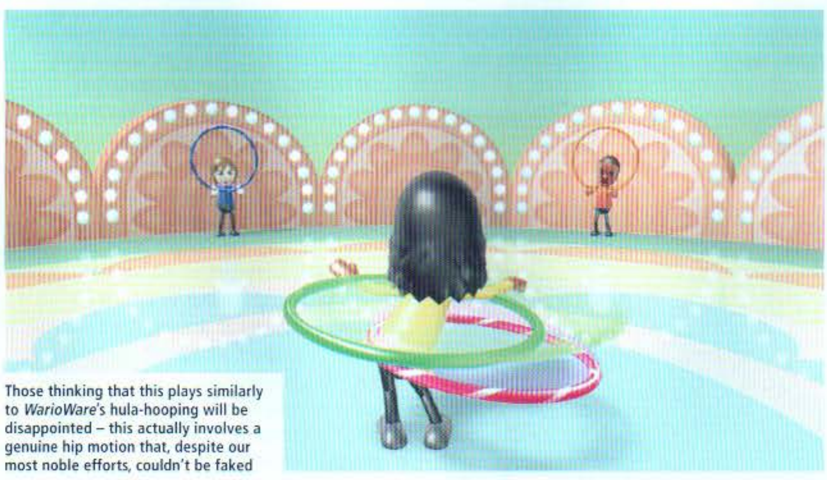
The exercises range from yoga positions to step aerobics, incorporating press-ups along the way and balance exercises such as ski jumping. The latter are the most 'gamey' aspect – heading footballs depends on quick reactions and balance, while the ski jump section requires you to squat before quickly standing for the jump. They're fun in a kinetic sense, but are only games in a one-dimensional way – not that that's a criticism. The yoga positions are dealt with in a clear, crisp style: an angular human figure moves slowly into the selected pose, and the screen tells you how long to hold it for and how close you are to your centre of gravity. Step aerobics are done to a scrolling central board showing foot positions while an array of Miis dance. It can all be understood at a glance, and therein is *Wii Fitness*'s quality.

Wii Fitness is a simple concept executed very well, and the fact that it angered some of the gaming world at its announcement is more an indictment of the industry than an understanding of how it can change the way non-gamers see consoles.



Do you want fries with that workout?

At E3, Shigeru Miyamoto spoke about the future possibilities for *Wii Fitness*, and confirmed that using WiiConnect24 is being considered by Nintendo. The possibilities for this are obvious: beyond simply allowing someone external to monitor your health (how could that affect your insurance premiums, we wonder?) or even tailor your regime, the opportunity would be there for continual updates to the basic exercises on offer – for a price. *Yourself Fitness* may point to another possible way forward: that game had a promotion with McDonalds when the latter was trying to promote its health credentials. In that case, salads from the McDonalds menu came with a DVD which had workouts to be used with the game, from cardiovascular training to yoga.

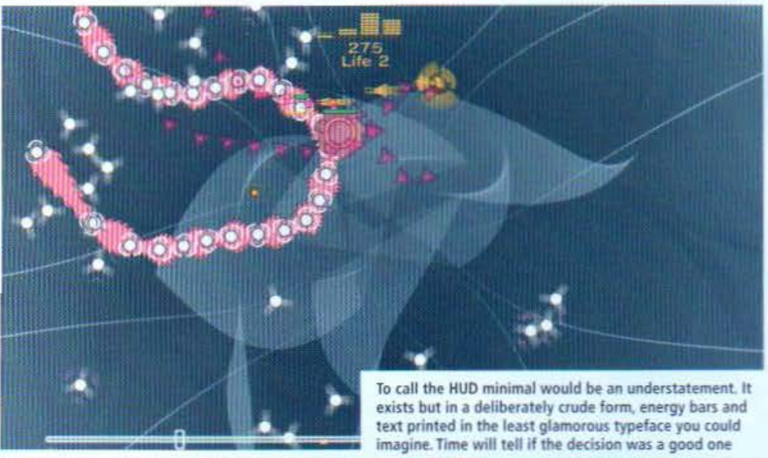


Those thinking that this plays similarly to *WarioWare*'s hula-hooping will be disappointed – this actually involves a genuine hip motion that, despite our most noble efforts, couldn't be faked

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **QUEASY GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**

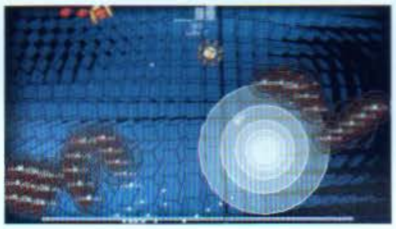
Everyday Shooter

As if the games-as-art argument wasn't irritating enough, here comes the synaesthesia movement's latest installation



To call the HUD minimal would be an understatement. It exists but in a deliberately crude form, energy bars and text printed in the least glamorous typeface you could imagine. Time will tell if the decision was a good one



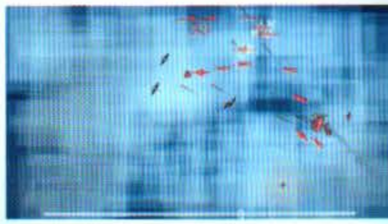


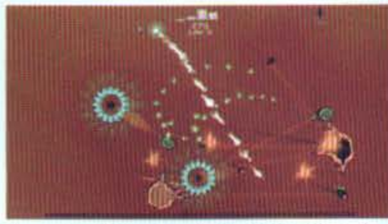
The title gives it away: *Everyday Shooter* is the game Mizuguchi built without even knowing it. By his own admission, designer Jonathan Mak (aka Queasy Games) concocted it during time spent with *Every Extend Extra* and *Lumines*, the first giving him a taste for 'symphonic chain reactions', the second an appreciation for the depths to which synaesthesia could be imitated on screen.

His own input (beyond coding the entire game himself, of course) has been to further explore the analogy of games as music albums, each of *Everyday Shooter's* levels having not just its own visual theme and sound arsenal but chaining mechanic and strategy, too. Furthermore, he's replaced the techno beats and pieces of Mizuguchi's games with a singular array of disembodied guitar riffs. The result, dare it be said, is like something ripped from the soundtrack of a Jim Jarmusch movie, acoustic and delicate but at the same time chaotic.

To its credit, *Everyday Shooter* hides its combo techniques well, challenging you to simply 'watch the graphics closely' and figure them out. Those visuals mightn't be as romantic as Mak likes to think, but their modulating geometry is mildly seductive, at least, even if its relationship with the game's audio is harder to appreciate than it should be. *Everyday Shooter's* probably best approached as one artist's indulgence rather than your next favourite score attack. It isn't a game you'll see every day – that much is certain, and appreciated – but it might not be one you'll play every day either.







The whole might be unique, but the details of *Everyday Shooter* are seldom so. *Mutant Storm, Geometry Wars, Every Extend Extra* and *Warning Forever* all influence

Project Rygar

Another classic franchise is getting updated for Wii – but can the diskarmor still cut the mustard?

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **TECMO**
DEVELOPER: **TEAM TACHYON**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Rygar was one of the few truly old titles to make a smooth transition to 3D, with *Rygar: The Legendary Adventure* on PS2. It was the precursor in many ways to *God Of War*, and featured some brilliant bosses as well as gorgeous classical scenery – and one of gaming's most iconic weapons in the diskarmor, a razor-edged Frisbee on a chain with multiple uses.

At a recent Tecmo event, the first screenshots of *Project Rygar* were released, showing a game that looks to have retained a penchant for big bosses mixed with cannon fodder. Though it might seem superficially similar to David Jaffe's series, *Project Rygar* will be more than a linear progression, with a *Metroid*-esque focus on new areas being unlocked through variants of the basic diskarmor, and a variety of subquests that help in levelling up your character.

And despite any obvious technical comparisons, *Rygar's* focus is on the Wii Remote, and it's easy to see how the diskarmor could work. The official tagline for the game seems to indicate as much – 'New hero, new enemies, swing action' – but when the likes of *Sengoku Musou Katana* are translating thirdperson actioners into FPS form to take advantage of Wii, retaining that thirdperson viewpoint needs to be more than loyalty. Whether *Rygar* can survive another generational leap will depend very much on whether it can adapt.

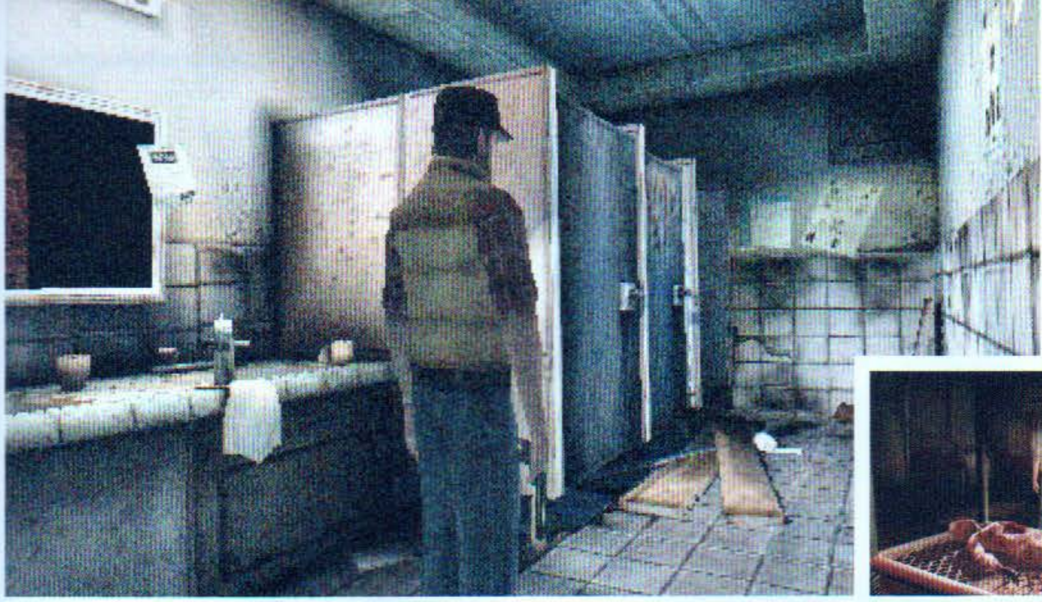


The diskarmor is, as the name suggests, a versatile tool – it can be used as a shield but also doubles up for enemy-slicing ranged attacks. And there will be plenty of baddies lining up to be unseamed



Several of the screens released show a combo meter totting up different awards, suggesting a hectic combat system designed for points rather than punishment





While many PSP conversions get chopped up into funkier chunks to compensate for any shrinkage, *Origins* is still aiming high, from universal realtime shadowing through to plans to proffer the largest enemies the series has seen





Silent Hill: Origins

Konami hands handheld responsibility to Climax and a trucker with a wide-load soul

It's not just *Origins'* lead character Travis 'O Grady that has a twisted history. The game itself seemingly has some skinless nurses in the closet, a pained past that has brought it to where it is today. Formerly handled by Climax's US arm, *Origins* once bore *Resident Evil 4*'s shoulder-mounted weapon aiming and a barricade system which allowed doors to be blocked with furniture, to hamstring enemies that (shock horror) knew how to use them. But such intentions must have soon transported the project into a troublesome, unsettling parallel reality fitting of *Silent Hill*'s own otherworld, resulting in the game being handed to Climax UK, and the additions dropped for more familiar mechanisms.

Which isn't to suggest that *Origins* simply retreads a traditional psycho's path. It's a prequel, sure, and it's one that heads straight back to the heart of the town of Silent Hill itself, its first area that most familiar of locations – the hospital. But the preamble makes its own mark, with a CB radio chat involving trucker Travis that hints at some prior 'issues' with his life, followed by a house fire, some outrageous occultism and Travis' rescue of a young girl that leads him to the hospital.

It's here that you'll become acquainted with two major changes. The first is Travis' ability to shift between the two worlds of Silent Hill – reality and its hostile, rust-ridden, gore-caked flipside – as and when he likes thanks to a series of mirrors, as opposed to simply being led from one to the other as the game dictates. Expect this to become intertwined more closely with puzzles than in previous *Hills*, especially since Travis' power to manipulate the world this way is part of why he's been drawn to the town. Secondly, and similarly, is combat, which has shifted from a heavily beaten track to the track of a heavy beater; Travis' dim past supposedly explains why he's such a capable brawler, and why he can turn so much furniture into self-defence. TV sets, filing cabinets, toasters, pool cues – over 50 distinct weapon types are available, even the bulkiest sitting happily in Travis' inventory, accessible from a realtime menu.

While these may sound like risky, diluting sops to purists, they don't feel like change for change's sake during play. Not least because so many of the series' motifs are present and pulsing, in a game that's been sanctioned but not dictated by Japan's Team Silent: Akira Yamaoka's signature score of melody and malevolence; environments that tell brutal stories; puzzles that, underneath their structure, are just as disquieting as any plot kink; questions raised that may never be answered. If anything feels wrong about *Silent Hill Origins*, then it's likely intentional. But even if you do hold some reservations, there's one overriding principle at play – any chance to revisit and further explore one of gaming's most enigmatic rabbit holes will always be welcome. It's a magnetism that Konami has spent some eight years crafting, and it's unlikely that Climax will dull that attraction any.





In a pun on 360's Achievements system, *Origins* features an 'Accolades' menu, to keep track of what you've unlocked and how. Climax is promising more extra content than previous games, hoping to encourage replay in a less obtuse manner than has been traditional



While Travis can carry an obese armoury – with larger items such as TVs offering one-use, one-hit kills on basic enemies – Silent Hill's own denizens fight back with QTE-style attacks that often kick in when they're allowed to get too close



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **CLIMAX**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**



Daemon Hill

A number of the original *Silent Hill*'s cast will reappear in *Origins*, to have their roles and histories fleshed out, including nurse Lisa Garland and Dr Kauffman. Alessa Gillespie features in the intro's sequence of events, while Dahlia Gillespie's particular interest in Travis is to be explained, alongside further insight into her cult, The Order. A familiar noise – the creeping radio-static that acts as an enemy detector – rather than a familiar face will also return. But, given the PSP's comparative lack of audio presence (along with the possibility of gamers playing without headphones), the screen now tilts and twists to provide a visual alarm.



Many locations are familiar, but there are new ones; early on, you'll push through a butcher's shop and expansive sanitarium

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **5TH CELL**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

Drawn To Life

Developer 5th Cell pictures the possibilities for the DS's versatile touchscreen and stylus interface

In contrast to its cutesy and simplistic presentation, *Drawn To Life* conceals a conceit of some unexpectedly post-modern self-awareness – the world and everything in it is a drawing. Its geography, flora, fauna, even the sun itself, are all created from blueprints held in the pages of a single tome. Unfortunately, one ne'er-do-well has stolen the book, torn out its pages and scattered them across the land, dooming many of the creations to oblivion.

In your role as the Creator, it is your task to redraw the world's vital components and rescue the Raposas, the world's surviving denizens, from darkness. To this end, you draw a hero with whom you can search the land for the fragments of the book, collecting the blueprints for the sun, essential crops and the like.

The action switches between the top-down faux-3D village of the Raposas, and side-on platforming, where you'll frequently be required to draw elements to help you on your way – from snow-powered weaponry to submarines. The drawing tools are pretty competent, with a powerful zoom and extensive palette options with which budding artists can create pixel-art of some sophistication. Once created, you can then share your creations via the DS's wifi connection.

It should be noted, however, that the drawing is handled somewhat prescriptively; you are not at liberty to create whatever you like, whenever you like. Your creations have strictly predetermined functions, and your efforts sometimes amount to little more than colouring in. It's easy to feel a pang of regret that the game doesn't follow in the footsteps of PS2 title *Magic Pengel*, in which your creations' abilities were directly tied to what you drew. However, even if it never manages to rise above the level of gimmickry, for those with artistic inclinations, the ability to draw elements within the game remains a pleasant quirk, one that will inevitably add value to this charming if fairly standard platformer.



The tools are decent, but most players will struggle to produce something that doesn't look jarringly amateurish in contrast to the otherwise superbly designed world





Each time you're damaged, part of the design for your hero's body disintegrates, leaving a more generic-looking limb beneath, until the bland mannequin that remains crumples to the ground



As well as searching for torn-up blueprints, you will also be able to free captured Raposas and collect additional palettes and pre-drawn stamps to elaborate your designs

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **GAMECOCK**
DEVELOPER: **RENEGADE KID**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Dementium: The Ward

Renegade Kid takes a shot at the DS's cuddly image with a barrelful of ghoulish terror

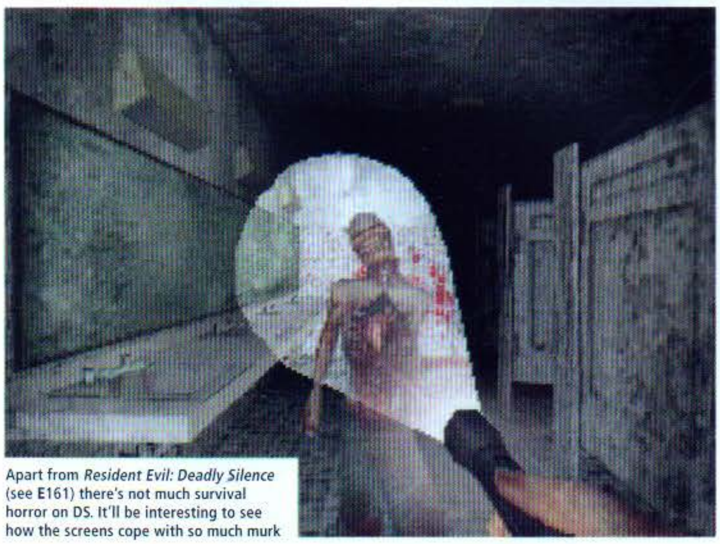
With Nintendo's continuing push towards the mainstream, sometimes it's difficult to see beyond the family-friendly image that the DS has embraced – full of frivolous diversions, colour, light and joy. Occasionally, however, a title comes along which jars with that perceived catalogue, making its adult offering all the more unsettling. *Dementium: The Ward* is a title that attempts to fill this role, a survival-horror shooter that pushes its old-school *Resident Evil* stylings to the point of viscera-soaked parody.

Awaking on a gurney in a deserted hospital, you must creep through dark, corpse-strewn halls, battling a legion of demented grotesqueries and solving the mysteries that stand between you and freedom. *Tingle's Rosy Rupeeland* this is not. Although scoring highly on the genre's cliché checklist (mental asylum, medical experiments gone wrong, messages written in blood, etc), *Dementium* does manage to conjure a grim and foreboding atmosphere – making a great deal of the DS's limited graphical power and relying on restricting your vision to disorient and unnerve you. In doing so it borrows *Doom 3*'s tension-building mechanic, forcing you to choose between a weapon or your flashlight.

Approaching FPS control conventions in much the same way as *Metroid Prime: Hunters*, the stylus is used to sweep your field of view around, and the L button to fire whichever weapon you have equipped. Now, as then, it is a scheme that works well, but, presumably, is no less liable to result in hand cramp. *Dementium* also has a note-taking system akin to that of *Hotel Dusk*, allowing you to jot down codes and clues, although it's not clear how involved the puzzle-solving aspect of the game will be or whether the occasional code hunt will simply be a means of breaking up the gun action.

Whether or not *Dementium* can satisfy FPS gamers, who have been spoiled on the visuals offered by more powerful systems, it is nonetheless refreshing to see a DS game pursue a genre so massively under-represented on the handheld. For this it should be applauded – if the hand cramp allows.





Apart from *Resident Evil: Deadly Silence* (see **E161**) there's not much survival horror on DS. It'll be interesting to see how the screens cope with so much murk



The water world features enemies that wriggle and squirm with pleasing fluidity. The squid beastie encounter involves chasing it around the pillars and avoiding its green spewing attack







Mutant Storm Empire

PomPom's twin-stick shooter gets re-reloaded on Xbox Live Arcade

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **POMPOM**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER**

Though one of Live Arcade's first stars, *Mutant Storm Reloaded*, by Brit indie game darling PomPom, was somewhat eclipsed by the starker – and cheaper – *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*. It was a great pity – *Mutant Storm*'s wide variety of play arenas and enemies (or 'beasties'), which included bosses, lent it a strategic diversity that made it in many ways more engaging than its twin-stick peers.

If there was one criticism that many had of the game, it was the game-flow-jarring loading screens between each of its 80-plus levels. And it's PomPom's fixing of this that forms the backbone to *Reloaded*'s successor, *Mutant Storm Empire*. As the name suggests, it features new territorial expansiveness in the form of stages connected to each other. Each of the 16 levels is formed by four stages, and each stage is made up of five connected rooms. On clearing each room, a door opens so you can move on to the next.

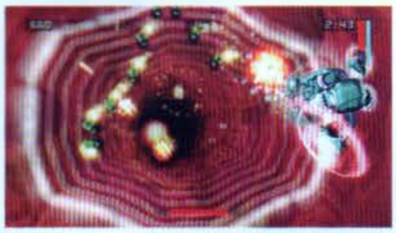
The result is better pacing and even more variety – from a circular arena you might go through to a battle in a corridor, then to an L-shaped room with a pillar – and it lends the action a greater sense of both flow and progress. The environments themselves vary between pleasingly chunky and angular industrial-looking machinery and rock, globular organic forms and abstract neon glowing boundaries, and they have a cleaner and more defined look than *Reloaded*'s.

The enemies show similar variety – crowds of buzzing robots fire slow-moving shots at you, fast-moving bugs swarm at you, balls rebound off walls towards you. Large bosses can transform a room into something that feels more like a traditional shooter as they fire patterns of bullets and advance toward your ship. And each beastie is given its own distinct set of sound effects, which combine to form a wonderfully rich, ambient, music-less soundtrack, from the metallic clinks of the balls bouncing off scenery to the buzzes and chirps of a horde of homicidal robots. The four different worlds feature matching sets of enemies and soundscapes, such as the squirming little fish things and shelled snail things found in the watery second world.

Empire has the same two play modes from *Reloaded* – tally and adventure. In adventure, players rack up a single score by playing through as many levels as they can before losing all their health. In tally, the game records individual scores for each of the 16 levels, allowing for shorter, more focused play sessions. It also features the same 'belts' difficulty settings, which award greater scores the higher the level.

Scoring itself is based partly on the multiplier system of its predecessors – the longer a player survives without taking damage, the higher the score bonus. But new to *Empire* are combos, an *Ikaruga*-esque chaining system. Large score bonuses are awarded to chained series of kills of like enemies. Chain lengths aren't all the same for each enemy – just two large clanking robots will win a bonus, but it might take 20 smaller, more prevalent enemies.





The backgrounds are detailed, but plain enough to avoid distracting from the often intense action. The variety of shapes and sizes of the rooms keeps players on their toes

The system completely transforms the playfield from a game of survival to one of careful planning and exhilarating risk-taking. Often, the key to claiming a full set of chains on a stage is to allow beasties to spawn all around you while hunting down the last members of the type you're chaining. And because even the likes of homing rockets shot out by turrets are fodder for combos, stages can be tackled many different ways.

Of course, there is probably just a single best solution to each stage, meaning that, ultimately, gaining high scores will be a matter of mechanically figuring out a puzzle. But at the very least, *Empire* does a good line in generating a heady rush the first time you play it. And the promise of further DLC sounds like it's an experience that will be sustained for some time.



Beastie joys

Empire features co-op play both locally and over Live. In these games, players play for a single score and have unified health. To balance things, beastie numbers are increased, firing ranges are cut and the heavy fire option that's so useful for getting solo players out of tight spots is deactivated. Each player racks up his or her own combos, so teamwork is required to cover spawn points that generate the beasties each player has elected to target, and sharing health means each session is full of the genial apologising and irate blaming that every good co-op game should have.



TITLE: **SUPER MARIO GALAXY**
FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER**



GALAXY QUEST



Mario is going boldly where no platformer has before, but can the most anticipated Wii title possibly meet the stratospheric expectations?

He's gaming's most ubiquitous character, but what is Mario? At the very least, he's a few red and blue pixels jumping around your television screen; at most, he's a global icon better known than Mickey Mouse who, more than any other character, is synonymous with the term 'videogame'. But whether jumping over barrels, sprinting to fill up a P-meter or simply soaring into the sky, one thing defines all of those videogames: getting from A to B. What Mario is the embodiment of for players, and the reason he's so compelling to control, is a set of universal laws: mass, momentum and inertia. Mario means perpetual motion.

In a wider context, the platform genre could just as easily be called the *Mario* genre, so fully have those games created and nurtured the tropes through which the style has evolved. *Super Mario Bros 3* and *Super Mario World* reached a pinnacle of 2D game design; with *Super Mario 64*, Nintendo redefined what the move to 3D could mean and set an example that no subsequent game has lived up to. It was at once the ultimate expression of creativity and an achievement that hamstrung its many imitators – stories abound of N64 titles being abandoned halfway through development after Mario's 3D debut. After all, what else could a 3D platformer do that that game didn't? Is there anything left to add to that intoxicating mix? It's taken Shigeru Miyamoto and Nintendo over a decade and several false starts to come up with an answer, and it's numbingly simple: gravity. With the internal logic of videogames being so recherché, the concept is less of a real-world limitation than a licence for virtual extravagance – across the widest canvas that could be imagined. We've found every hidden corner of *Super Mario World*: it's time to explore *Super Mario Galaxy*.







It's one of the strengths of the series that, even as it presents a completely new vision of the platform game, it manages to do it while maintaining such a distinctive aesthetic and character roster









But to begin at home, what's changed about Mario? It's testament to the brilliance of Miyamoto's original vision that he's almost no different from his 3D debut over a decade ago, down to the smallest details: just like *Super Mario 64*, leave Mario alone long enough and he falls asleep. He's completely familiar and – barring the graphical sheen – no different physically, bar a few new moves, and there's even a return for an old one: the long jump. And those new moves are designed for convenience rather than revolution: it proves occasionally difficult in certain positions to line up a perfect jump on enemies, thus the spin attack removes the need to do so. If there's any difference, Mario's momentum can initially seem slightly muted from the slip-slide speed of *Super Mario Sunshine*, but that's both a consequence of a slightly more panoramic camera and something well judged with relation to the gravity and locations. It's a perfect example of a core strength of the *Mario* series, and Nintendo as a whole: building an entirely new structure around a familiar and solid foundation that clearly works.

So Mario's the same plumber in a new world. The speed, and the slipperiness in a sense, comes from the new tricks of this environment: the first planetoid has a central hollow 'core' that will instantly transport Mario from top to bottom and back again, as well as several pipes that transport him from location to location on the surface. You can move from one side of a planet to the other in seconds. As well as these set elements, the gravity that controls movement on the planets has some remarkable applications: the one that delights initially, and is then repeated ad infinitum, is long-jumping from a surface and looping around the entire object. Naturally this can only be accomplished on the smaller masses – as Mario's speed increases on each loop you get closer to the ground and desperately try to keep him going. It's thrilling, and always slightly disappointing when you land. The camera could have been a worry, but it's robust and effortlessly follows these moves and your topsy-turvy running over and around the planets, changing the perspective during movement only rarely. As Mario launches from stars – which feels pleasingly fast – it follows his glide easily while giving you an overview of your imminent destination. Most effectively, the angle will sometimes change for a

TWOPLAYER MODE



Super Mario Galaxy's twoplayer mode is based around a second pointer which can be controlled in much the same way as the first but has several different properties. It can pick up stars and fire them at enemies to clear Mario's path and help him, but it can also be used to fire stars at Mario and even influence his movement directly. Infuriating moments with that latter feature surely lie ahead. As with other Wii concepts, the thinking behind this design was to allow parents who won't be familiar with platformers to experience the game with their children: very laudable, but also destined to cause some interesting family arguments. As yet, there's no word on the incorporation or otherwise of Luigi.



particularly dramatic turn as you slingshot around a black hole. Nor are these regular space flights simply passive breaks from the planets: though you can't directly control Mario, you can collect stars by pointing at them with the Remote, while pointer secrets abound in the vast space that surrounds you.

This is the real revolution in the player's relationship to Mario, and it's a quiet one. The use of the pointer looks simple, and may seem from mere screenshots like Nintendo shoehorning Wii Remote functionality into a flagship title. But the basic pointer control is a subtle addition to 3D platforming that alters the dynamic of your play considerably once mastered. You can use the pointer to collect stars by moving it over them, to fire those stars at enemies or items on the screen by using the 'B' button, or for several other contextual interactions. The Remote can also be used to pull certain objects in the game – structures will sometimes act as slingshots, where you essentially have to twang the elastic back and

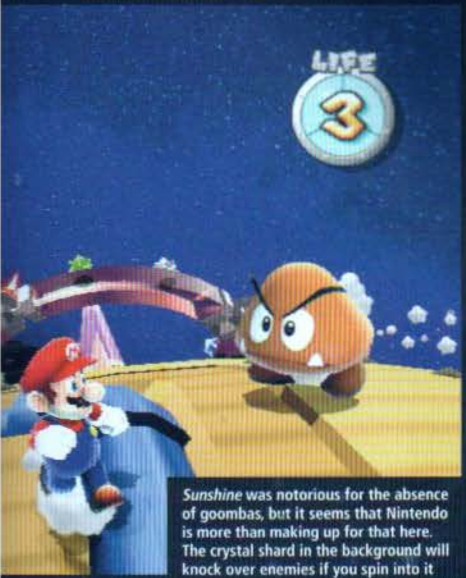


There's Magikoopa, and (below right) a Torpedo Ted. The airships suggest, tantalisingly, some sort of Bowser-led space armada that Mario will have to confront – and perhaps even koopalings?



THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE, FROM YOUR FIRST STAR TO SMASHING THE HUGE GOOMBA THAT GUARDS THE FINAL PIPE, IS SIMPLY FUN

launch Mario into space. It can also play with and bend elements of the levels, be used to move up vines in a spinning motion, or rotate the stems of seed parachutes to maintain momentum, and its use throughout is hugely tactile. You'll find yourself spinning through crystals to release collectables and simply sprinting onwards, using the pointer to suck up the goodies, or firing stars at enemies in advance so Mario can dash through and send them flying. It gives a feeling of control over events onscreen that allows you to almost prefigure Mario's movement through the level, and it's a much more powerful collecting tool and influence on your play than it might seem.



Sunshine was notorious for the absence of goombas, but it seems that Nintendo is more than making up for that here. The crystal shard in the background will knock over enemies if you spin into it

Galaxy isn't slow to emphasise this, but it does it in a subtle manner that's also the first time any game has dared to look *Super Mario 64* straight in the eye. The first part of the latter to be created, after Mario himself, was MIPS the rabbit – who found his way into the finished game's basement and had to be caught for one of the castle's secret stars. It was a piece of throwaway fun, yet rewarded you as much as any other individual effort in the game. The first part of *Super Mario Galaxy* has three MIPS-like rabbits which have to be chased around the surface of a planet: it's at once an homage to the earlier game and an opportunity for *Galaxy* to show its changes. If you remember MIPS, you'll remember he was difficult to catch, and it was only possible through using Mario's dive – a move that has disappeared. So *Galaxy* gives you two options – you can spend time running down the rabbits until they tire, or if you're familiar with your new abilities you can bounce stars off their heads to stun them for an easy catch. This time, your rabbit-catching reward is a star of a different kind: one that will launch you into space. It's a typically elegant piece of design, allowing the player to get a feel for the new surfaces, camera and abilities while fulfilling an entertaining, somewhat familiar, task.

After this, the game moves into gear. You launch into space, bounce on goombas and come across several small challenges that show off the game's mind-bending surfaces. At the end of this first level – which is much larger and more involved than that of King Bob-omb, the first star in *Super Mario 64* – you enter a chunky green pipe and have a final puzzle to solve involving switches, a wall-sticking environment, and solid rectangles that rotate and attempt to electrocute you. It's utterly abstract, utterly compelling, and the whole experience, from blasting through your first star to smashing the huge goomba that guards the final pipe, is simply fun. Interestingly, this star is a 'great' star, and finding it results in a different animation from that of finding a 'normal' star, much as with the keys in *Super Mario 64* – suggesting that the structure of *Galaxy* will be similar.

There will be six main themes to the 40 galaxies, each with multiple planets and environments and a total of 120 stars between them, and the design team have confirmed the usual range of themes, from a ghost house and snowy plains to a lava planet. The locales are instantly familiar, from Mario grasping a shell in the inevitable underwater planet to running around the ring of doughnut worlds, but Nintendo has many more uniquely styled areas up its sleeve that it will not be revealing before the game launches.

The galaxies have distinctive visual



Princess Rosetta, the 'watcher of the stars', tells you to travel the galaxy to find your 'loved one' – surely Peach – and awards a new power, suggesting more upgrades later



The Honeybee galaxy (below) is a much more typical *Mario* environment, but switching between this and the space levels is painless – despite the variety, it's a masterpiece of coherent design









Moving between the planets is sometimes achieved with star launchpads, and sometimes with the blue globes seen on the left: the pointer turns into a squat Mario glove, and grabbing each globe is fairly easy. It can seem slightly too passive in such a fast-moving game, but gently floating is also a welcome change in pace. What happens above, meanwhile, speaks for itself



UP, UP AND AWAY



There have been two costumes shown thus far. The bee suit allows you to fly for a short time, but also reduces Mario's weight and lets him climb certain honeycombed wall sections, with a weirdly authentic bee-waggle. There is also 'Boo Mario', complete with red cap and ghostly moustache: in this form he moves slightly slower, but can pass through certain surfaces and is not seen as an enemy by other boos. The only slight disappointment with the power-ups thus shown is that they're very context-dependent: the bee suit is obviously designed for the bee levels where the specific abilities are demanded, and this will likely be the case with the boo suit. It's not bad design by any means, but it's some distance from the freedom of using the cape or racoon suit in any level or situation you choose.

identities – the Star Dust galaxy, for example, has a purple tinge to distant constellations and the levels seem to be full of more geometric shapes formed into angular arrangements. There's an almost building-brick quality behind many of the stages, with seemingly arbitrary connections, angles and segments shooting off in any direction necessary. The Honeybee galaxy, on the other hand, features as its backdrop a bright blue sky with puffy clouds, its foreground a jumble of rounded corners and vaulted archways. More interestingly, this is a flat stage, retaining several of *Galaxy*'s visual signatures as Mario moves through the level, such as the jump stars and a camera-twisting slide, but it's not a 3D structure that can be navigated on every surface.

That aspect of the design can't be overemphasised: *Super Mario Galaxy* isn't simply about running around globes. The levels incorporate anything from asteroid nuggets to huge pill-shaped structures with walls made of glass, and they're held together thematically rather than structurally. There are completely forgiving gravity-fests where leaps into space will simply lead to whirling around the various centres of gravity pulling Mario, and planets that are hollow shells of their former selves with a black hole at their core, where your platforming will have to be at its best. But whether playing on the flat levels or the hugely expansive heliocentric collections of space junk, they feel genuinely open, despite the obvious linearity of your objectives, and free-roaming around them is encouraged with the usual assortment of hidden tricks and locations. Captain Olimar's ship even turns up a few times as a navigable part of the scenery, and several other Nintendo in-jokes appear throughout. The locations also feature constant movement, whether it's simply creatures popping up to waddle around or asteroids smashing into the ground around you, with stars popping out and waiting to be swept up with the Remote.

In this range of environments and the playful approach to their construction, it's obvious that Nintendo has picked up on the criticisms levelled at *Sunshine*'s relatively few environments and repetition. *Sunshine* also suffered from, among other things, the imposition of an unnecessary external narrative beyond 'Princess captured, go rescue' – it was the first *Mario* game to put him in anything approaching a realistic world, away from the pipes, mushrooms and question blocks that surrounded his adventures. But where the Piantas and Isle Delfino felt a little too contrived and even (whisper it) soulless, *Super Mario Galaxy*, though no less populous, feels more naturally Mario's world. There are toads, talking bees and friendly stars waiting to speak to you in the earlier levels (communication is handled via an automatic and unobtrusive speech bubble which doesn't stop the game), and where *Sunshine*'s population was full of complaining Piantas and demanding tasks to be fulfilled, *Galaxy*'s script looks to be classic Nintendo, at once practical, childish and self-referential. In the Honeybee galaxy, one of the worker bees tells you: "That red and blue outfit looks so tacky!" while another informs you that "The castle's past this wall – bees never lie!"



Perhaps the biggest lesson learned, however, is what makes the *Mario* series unique. They have something that almost no other game, never mind platform game, can muster: nostalgia. And *Galaxy* exploits this wonderfully and mercilessly. Levels have been seen showing Monty Mole, bob-ombs, boos, Pokey (the four-segment cactus), thwomps, magikoopas, chain chomps, unagis, flippy birds, bloopers, dry bones, wigglers, piranha plants, koopa troopas, bullet bills and even pumpkin goombas. There are 1up mushrooms, power mushrooms and even question blocks (with the old hit-repeatedly-until-it's-empty trademark). Mario has been shown jumping on airships reminiscent of the battlefields from World 8 of *Mario Bros 3*, and moving through pipe lands that twist in space in a brain-fizzingly angular manner. There are remarkable abstract sections, played out to a slightly updated form of the 'pipe world' music from the original *Super Mario Bros*, where squares, triangles and rectangles float in space, and as Mario runs into emptiness they coalesce

EVEN THE MOST UNFAMILIAR MOMENTS HAVE ELEMENTS THAT ARE DESIGNED TO MAKE THE NINTENDO FAN IN ALL OF US REJOICE

into platforms under his feet. After initial trepidation, they prove to be as solid a surface as the planets, and inspire several flights of jumping fancy into nothingness. Even the most unfamiliar moments have elements that are designed to make the Nintendo fan in all of us rejoice.

What's surprising is how familiar it is, and yet how utterly fresh it still feels. Every previous game in the series seems to have been considered as a possible source for new material. It views and uses one of the most venerable histories in gaming as only a truly confident title can, and is something you want to prod and poke and simply play with.

No one yet knows if *Galaxy* can maintain the momentum and range of its early showings, and avoid the repetition that marred *Sunshine*. No one yet knows if it will be able to thrive on the unavoidable comparisons to one of gaming's landmark titles. They're unfair, in a sense, because nothing can ever match up to that moment when you set your eyes on *Mario 64*; nothing ever could compare to that change in dimension. But *Super Mario Galaxy* has something of its own. It's the sense of a universe of possibilities with everything you can imagine, and more that you can't. It's a sheer joy. It's the sense of something you thought may have been lost to videogames returning. The feeling of wonder might, just might, be coming back.

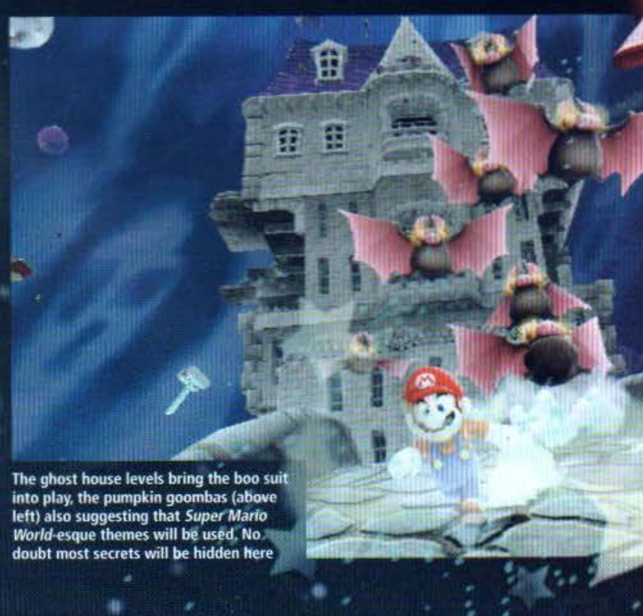




This is, without a shadow of a doubt, the best-looking game on Wii, making the likes of *Metroid Prime 3* look dated. Crawling around the queen bee's fur (top) is a definite visual highlight









The ghost house levels bring the boo suit into play, the pumpkin goombas (above left) also suggesting that *Super Mario World*-esque themes will be used. No doubt most secrets will be hidden here


ANAHEIM C
BLIZZ CON
BlizzCon

Snow business

From the hot Californian sun to the cold climes of the new WOW expansion, we let Blizzard entertain us at BlizzCon 2007



Los Angeles, Friday August 3, 11am: the opening ceremony of the second convention of Blizzard fans, BlizzCon 2007. There are thousands of them gathered in the main hall of the Anaheim Convention Center, and somewhere in their midst a Blizzard staffer with a mic is performing a perfunctory warm-up routine that could only ever work on this crowd.

"Where's all my warlocks at?" His question is met with instant pandemonium: wild cheering, furious bellows of offended rage, shouts begging for class recognition. "Priests! Let's hear it!" The room's walls ought to be shaking from the noise, but this dark, cavernous space doesn't seem to have any. "Who am I missing? Shamans?" It's as if he flicked a switch. Seconds ago the atmosphere was characterised by an indistinct burble of muted chatter, and the drone of sponsors' stands. Now, it's electric. Just like that, BlizzCon 2007 has begun.

Fast-forward 20 minutes, and company president and co-founder Mike Morhaime has trotted through his introductory remarks, outlined the weekend's schedule, pimped





Jay Mohr was swamped with dozens of entrants for the soundalike contest (top right), but he handled them all with charm. The winner was a blood elf from *WarCraft III* (note to aspiring entrants: don't do something like a murloc or an orc peon if you want to stand out). The dance contest was rather pleasingly overrun with blood elf females (second row, centre), so this spirited ogre (right) made for a nice change. Sort of. He gets points for enthusiasm, anyway



The new ten-man raid zone, Zul'Aman, follows the tremendous success of *Burning Crusade*'s Karazhan, now the most-run instance in the game. Also imminent in patches are integrated voice chat, guild banks and a revised levelling curve to 60

WRATH OF THE LICH KING
BRINGING MORE WORLD TO YOUR WARCRAFT

There wasn't much about *WOW* that the first expansion, *The Burning Crusade*, didn't change. From damage calculations to raid culture to player-versus-player combat (never mind the two new races and the space-faring spectacle) it was a Herculean effort to set Blizzard's world to rights. It was tremendously exciting, and it worked – which, unfortunately, is why its successor, *Wrath Of The Lich King*, can't possibly carry the same charge.

There's a sense of Blizzard settling in for the long haul here. Raid dungeons for ten or 25 players, ten more levels, new character customisation options, new professions, new battlegrounds... there's one tick in every column, but just the one, leaving plenty of room for another one next year, and the year after that.

The biggest change is also the most obvious sign that a formula has been decided on. The new Death Knight class is a high-level-only 'hero class' – one of several to come, we're told, clearly paving the way for these to headline future expansions. That said, the Death Knight's rune resource system ought by all accounts to introduce a fascinating, fresh and highly flexible new play style.

The only major revisionism going on in *Lich King* is an attempt to revive the moribund state of world PVP by dedicating a whole zone of the new continent, Northrend, to massed combat, and introducing destructible buildings and siege weapons. But *Lich King* has subtler promise than social engineering.

Its primary villain, a human knight turned undead chieftain, is one of the strongest and most popular characters in the *WarCraft* universe. Kaplan is determined for him to dominate the entire experience, rather than just serve as a remote raid boss, and to bring something of *WarCraft III*'s epic pathos to the mix.

The stage is perfectly set: Northrend seems to have all the scale and staggering beauty of Outland, whilst being more consistent and grounded. If all *Lich King* achieves is to elevate standards of narrative cohesion and drive in the MMO form while maintaining *WOW*'s otherwise lofty standards, it will still be a towering achievement.

StarCraft II, and casually mentioned that *World Of WarCraft*'s population of nine million is bigger than half of the countries in the world (also double what it was at the time of the first BlizzCon, in October 2005). His co-founder and executive vice president for product development, the laconic **Frank Pearce**, is now prowling the stage, making the surprise announcement of a second *WOW* expansion, *Wrath Of The Lich King*.

Well, it was supposed to be a surprise. Over the preceding week a sequence of leaks – first the title, then the location (the new continent of Northrend), and finally an official FAQ detailing every major feature of the expansion – has stolen Blizzard's thunder. The developer is said to be angry and disappointed to be cheated of a big reveal before the faithful.

But it doesn't seem to matter. Every feature on Pearce's list elicits whoops, applause, even shocked gasps. The new Death Knight hero class gets a screamed welcome that would overwhelm a rock star. When Pearce concludes, attendees scramble from their seats and run at full pelt to the banks of *Lich King* demo PCs waiting in the neighbouring hall.

It's hard to believe that Blizzard fans dedicated enough to spend $100 a head and travel to California in order to meet their heroes hadn't picked up on the leaks. But from the strength of their reaction, clearly the only thing that matters to them is hearing it from the horse's mouth. In this unusually passionate, candid and exclusive relationship between developer and fan, the gamers put their trust only and completely in their idols, and they are well rewarded: with information and access equal to that granted to the world's media. There are no embargoes, no exclusives here, and the only difference between punters and press is the length of the queue.

"My first impression of BlizzCon was: 'Holy shit!'" says Pearce later. "It's surreal to have so many people so passionate about what we're doing." Attendance this year is an eyebrow-raising 13,000 (up from 8,000 in 2005) – equivalent to a medium-sized music festival. We put it to him that there aren't many game developers that could hold an event this size. What is it that makes Blizzard's relationship with its fans so different that management and creatives alike will be greeted with cries of "We love you!" when they take to the stage?

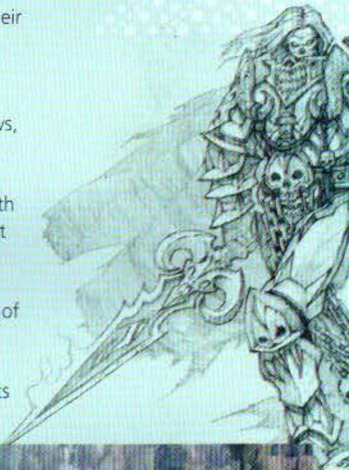
"WHAT REALLY BINDS THE COMMUNITY TO THE ORGANISATION IS A SHARED PASSION FOR GAMING. IF YOU WALK AROUND THE SHOW FLOOR, ONE IN EVERY TEN PEOPLE IS A BLIZZARD EMPLOYEE"

He reckons there is an unusual bond – or rather, a blurred line – between developer and player: "What I think really binds the community to the organisation is a shared passion for gaming, and Blizzard games in particular. If you walk around the show floor, one in every ten people you see is a Blizzard employee."

COO **Paul Sams** agrees: "I think the fans are excited to meet the guys making these games because they're just like them. These are gamers. With other game companies you might meet up with some suits that you can't relate to because they're not into it. There are a large number of gamers at other companies, but not across the board. Every one of us plays games."

Suits are of course eschewed in favour of Blizzard T-shirts and bowling shirts, and throughout the weekend the executives are happy to let their fanboyish appreciation of their own games bubble over. Pearce discusses his *WOW* raiding schedule and recent armour acquisitions. Even Sams, a slick, relentlessly on-message corporate spokesman in interviews, occasionally slips out of character (if hardly off-message). "I'm a hardcore *StarCraft* fan. It's my favourite game of all time," he says with naked enthusiasm – and just a suggestion that he's happy to have a game to talk about that isn't *World Of WarCraft*.

Later, back in the main hall, vice president of game design Rob Pardo and senior designer Dustin Browder (poached from *Command & Conquer*) are presenting *StarCraft II*. New units





Unlike *Burning Crusade*'s Outland, *Lich King*'s Northrend will have two points of entry and two starting zones. This is to ease server stress and give players a different experience when building a new character

STARCRAFT II
NOT JUST FOR THE FIVE-CLICKS-A-SECOND CLUB

Unlike most sequels that follow the original by a whole decade – if there are any others – *StarCraft II* isn't described in a bullet-pointed revolutionary manifesto of big features. It's described in high-contrast, high-resolution detail, whether that be the startlingly crisp and vibrant graphics, or the torrent of information on new units provided by senior designer Dustin Browder. That's because that's what *StarCraft* players care about, and because when it comes to the big picture, we already know precisely what we're getting: classic Blizzard-style RTS, unchanged and engineered for tactics, skill and blistering speed. Even the screen layout is pure familiarity.

There may yet be a revolution to come. Blizzard has big ambitions for competitive gaming, and hasn't yet revealed the promised sweeping changes to its battle.net service. It's those same ambitions that keep the game as we currently see it bound to the tight, fixed camera and quasi-isometric perspective of ten years ago. But after the new Terran units have been explained – including Banshee gunships, massive mechs called Thors, much more powerful Ghosts and retractable supply depots – it's not multiplayer that's on the agenda at BizzCon.

Instead, a beguiling frontend for the singleplayer campaign is demonstrated. Replacing *StarCraft*'s static briefing room is the bridge of Terran commander Jim Raynor's ship, with exquisitely rendered characters looming large and lending colour. Raynor can move and interact here and in the armoury and cantina, exploring dialogue-tree subplots, investigating a new research system, or choosing between multiple, branching missions. *StarCraft II* promises a narrative RTS adventure that's more languid, less linear, but no less rich in character than the legendary *WarCraft III*. Campaign is the yin to the yang of the game's pro-gaming pedigree, and the package is all the stronger for it.



Terran Battle Cruisers and Vikings assaulting a Protoss base in *StarCraft II*. The maps feature better use of elevation and more sophisticated fog of war than the original, but it's the eye-watering detail and neon luminescence that really stand out



are analysed in depth, and the lavish frontend for the singleplayer campaign is shown for the first time. The audience is attentive and clearly impressed, and as with all BlizzCon panels, has a string of variously astute and obsessive questions to ask afterwards. But it's also a much smaller and far less excitable crowd than the one that sat enraptured through *WOW* lead designer **Jeff Kaplan** and company's surprisingly detailed and frank talk on *Wrath Of The Lich King* after lunch.

There are plenty of practical reasons for that. *StarCraft II* wasn't freshly announced that morning, for one. It's late in the day, and many attendees are queuing for a go on the demos, or absorbed in the strangely compelling spectacle of the *WarCraft III* semi-finals. But there's a nagging feeling that a game ten years in the making, the sequel to a much-loved classic, and Blizzard's long-awaited return to realtime strategy is looking like this weekend's support act, playing second fiddle to an expansion pack. It seems that Blizzard's greatest PR challenge since convincing the world it could make an MMO will be convincing the world it ever did anything else.

"*World Of WarCraft* has really captured the hearts and minds – I think it's especially captured the hearts and minds of the press," says Sams pointedly. "Marvelling at how many people have become subscribers, that's a big story. Will we be able to top that? I don't know. That's a tall order. But while it may not have the sexy story associated with having subscribers paying a monthly fee, I believe that it's going to generate its own share of interest, because I believe that this is going to be the game that's going to help propel e-sports into North America and Europe like it's never been seen before. I think this is going to be the one."

"I BELIEVE THAT STARCRAFT II IS GOING TO BE THE GAME THAT'S GOING TO HELP PROPEL E-SPORTS INTO NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE LIKE IT'S NEVER BEEN SEEN BEFORE"

In the meantime, though, it's not just Blizzard's media coverage that is being overrun by *WOW*. So is the company itself. The game's tremendous demands on infrastructure and customer support, never mind content creation, have seen the staff balloon from 300-odd to 2,600. How does it keep its identity – its high standards and that internal, reflexive fandom – intact in the face of that kind of expansion?

"It is a challenge," concedes Pearce. "We have a set of core values and philosophies that allow us to do what we do. In the old days those values were sort of unspoken and understood, because the teams were small. And now we're so large that you just can't expect that to happen by accident the way it used to. You've got to start doing some things that protect those values – not just protect them but also communicate them. A lot of this stuff is written in management books, which," he says with a shrug, "we now have to start reading."

That evening, and the comedian **Jay Mohr** has taken the stage unannounced (except by himself), and he's warming up BlizzCon for an indulgent marathon of user-created silliness and self-referential geekery: dance contests, soundalike impressions, machinima screenings and the all-important costume competition. Mohr seems at home, relaxed in his rabble-rousing, beaming at his vast congregation of the formerly dispossessed. "We are the new jocks, and this is our high school!" he shouts, to a tumultuous response.

For the next three hours Mohr really earns his appearance fee – he's an expert MC, as hard-working as he is laid-back – but, corny as it is to say it, the fans are the true stars. What sounded excruciating on paper turns out to be a delightful evening, notable for the affectionate warmth of the audience and the spirited self-mockery of the performers. The humour and sauciness Blizzard has graced the subject matter with certainly help, too.

The dance-contest winner does his routine in character as Napoleon Dynamite, wearing a T-shirt that reads 'Vote for Kael'Thas' (*WarCraft's* Blood Elf prince). Some costumes are outright spectacular, some are barely there. Mohr is visibly surprised and tickled by it all. It's all one giant in-joke, of course, but it's extrovert, sexy and funny – everything online gaming is supposed not to be.

"It's very important that we always



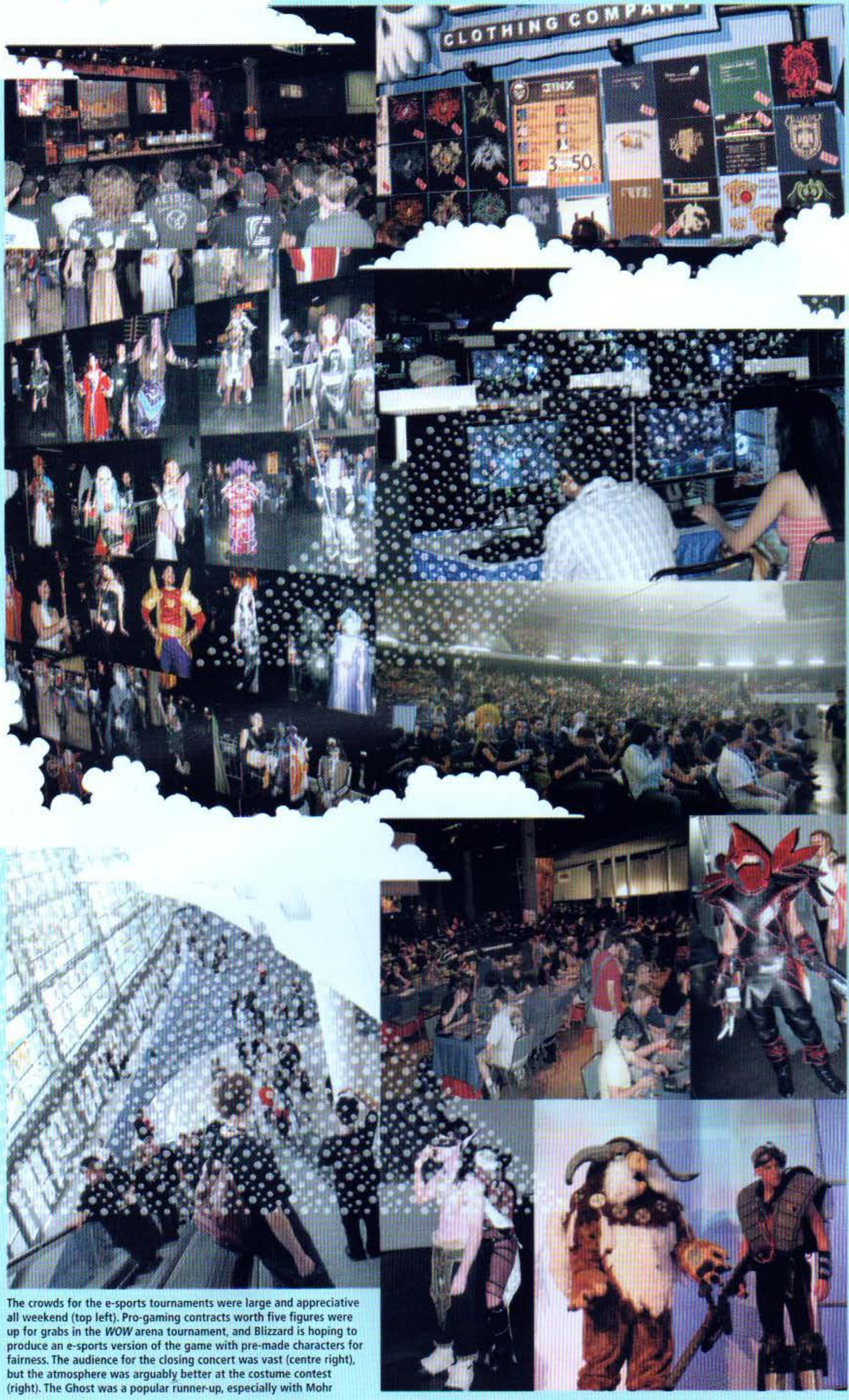
Utgarde Keep, the Viking stronghold instance found in *Wrath Of The Lich King*'s opening Howling Fjord zone. Upgraded flame and smoke effects are among the expansion pack's technical advances







The astonishing winning costume (top left) was only slightly diminished by the wearer having to sidle very gingerly off stage. This *WarCraft III* match (top right) was contested between France's Tod and the Netherlands' Grubby, although like many pro-gamers Tod makes his living in China. The Video Games Live performance of Blizzard's greatest hits (centre right) naturally featured great music, but was hampered by overcooked sound and poor presentation



The crowds for the e-sports tournaments were large and appreciative all weekend (top left). Pro-gaming contracts worth five figures were up for grabs in the *WOW* arena tournament, and Blizzard is hoping to produce an e-sports version of the game with pre-made characters for fairness. The audience for the closing concert was vast (centre right), but the atmosphere was arguably better at the costume contest (right). The Ghost was a popular runner-up, especially with Mohr



remember that we're entertaining people first and foremost," says Kaplan the next day. "A lot of [MMO] developers get too focused on controlling a community, and that's the wrong approach. People are using their leisure time when they could be watching a George Lucas movie, or the Sopranos, or going to a Mozart symphony. They don't want to be manipulated as part of a social experiment. They want to be entertained." And the more Blizzard entertains them, the easier it is for them to entertain each other. If there's one secret to *WOW*'s rich community spirit, this could be it.

The next morning sees Blizzard executives and designers, bleary-eyed and toting huge Starbucks cups (with the exception of the ever-alert Sams), mingling and doing interviews, fielding questions from the characteristically spiky European press. Don't they ever wish, we ask Pearce, that they could finish their games in splendid isolation, and present them to the world fully formed?

"Yes, yes, yes," he says fervently, but quickly contradicts himself. "At the same time, though, we need the feedback. While a lot of us wish that's how we could do it, realistically I don't think we could do what we do without exposing it to the media, fans and everyone else before it's done."

To get feedback you have to put up with questions, and the question that everybody is always dying to ask Blizzard – even when it has recently announced its first new game in years – is: what's next? When are you going to do *Diablo III*? What about a *World Of StarCraft*? What about consoles, or some fresh IP? Will there be a *WOWII*?

There's one sense in which having a hit MMO is a poisoned chalice. Blizzard is more successful than ever, but now *WOW* dominates its resources and mindshare, and broods over its future, demanding if, when and how it should be followed. Few who've succeeded in the MMO field have done so twice. It may be the definition of a good problem to have, but it's still a problem.

Sams warns of the dangers of the irresistible honey-trap all of that subscriber revenue represents. "I think a lot of companies that get a taste of what an MMO can do for their financial performance – they get this, and I'll use a Blizzard term, they get this 'blood lust' for more… We think that having a portfolio that is



Left to right: Jon Jashni and Thomas Tull of Legendary Pictures, with Blizzard's Chris Metzen and Paul Sams, discussing the WarCraft film project. Tull promised a director of the calibre of Chris Nolan (Batman Begins) or Zack Snyder (300)

WARCRAFT THE MOVIE
NEVER LET A TAUREN LOOSE WITH POPCORN

The Saturday lunchtime panel on Blizzard's long-planned WarCraft film revealed very little hard detail beyond the fact that the film will certainly be live action, and is scheduled for release in 2009. With script unfinished and director and cast unattached, it would be easy to picture it in development hell, were it not for the immense clout of the licence, and the producers' proven appetite and aptitude for genre adaptation. Legendary Pictures was responsible for Batman Begins and flavour-of-2006 300.

The better to draw in *WOW*'s millions of fans, the story will be set about a year before the MMO's starting point, and feature the same races, lands and context. The budget is a middling $100 million; visual style will be dictated by the director, but it was noted that 300 "opened a lot of doors" in terms of replicating Blizzard's distinctive look.



The film will focus on the conflict between the Horde and Alliance, and be told from an Alliance perspective – much to Horde players' displeasure, an orc hero was said to be too hard a sell. But Metzen hinted that it wouldn't be a clear-cut struggle. "Thematically it's about cultures in conflict, the cycle of violence," he said. "It's not so much a quest movie. It's absolutely a war movie."

focused solely on your MMOs is going to set you up to fail. You're putting all your eggs in one basket, assuming that all the gamers are going to want to play that type of game over and over again.

"And also, we need to give *World Of WarCraft* time to breathe. That's why a lot of sequels don't perform, because players don't want to pick up and leave the community and all the things that they've done. They've put a lot of time and energy into it. To ask them to move is a big request. Hopefully, we'll time it right."

Pearce, who puts *WOW*'s lifespan at a (frankly conservative) five to ten years, says that Blizzard's hands are more than full as they are, though he does confirm that a third, as-yet-unannounced game is in development. "We've set our goal to release an expansion every year, but we probably aren't quite where we need to be to achieve that goal just yet. *WOW* team aside, we've got *StarCraft II* in development, we've got a third team working on a game they're really passionate about. But even with only three teams we're spread really thin."

On the Saturday, affable designer Tom Chilton is being harangued by a fan, told that he "really needs to do something" about the warlock's overpowered Fear spell (cue applause). We're watching this on screens from hall B of the Anaheim centre because there's a delay to the *StarCraft* semi-final. One of the two South Korean players – Kang Min, aka Nal_rA, who has a reputation as a creative genius, the Muhammad Ali of pro-gaming – has a problem with his mouse drivers. If you play at a speed of 300 actions per minute (that's five mouse-clicks or key-presses per second), a problem with your mouse drivers is pretty serious.

When the match gets under way, it's thrilling. Hard to follow if you don't play *StarCraft* (perhaps even for many who do), but even so, the players' sheer speed, and the organic flow their micromanagement skills bring to the game, is a pleasure to watch. On-the-ball commentators and a knowledgeable, vocal, standing-room-only audience add to a great atmosphere. It's a taste of what it must be like to attend a championship in South Korea, where *StarCraft* is a full-fledged sport, and players are pin-ups.

Deathmatch my rule in the west, but in Asia e-sports belongs to Blizzard. This is just one reason why *StarCraft II* is such an important release for the company, and a sensitive one too (as sensitive as, say, an MMO sequel). Won't it be difficult to convince pros who've trained on a single game for half their lives to migrate?

"It's really a decision for the pro players," says Pearce. "Grubby [Manuel Schenkhuizen, a Dutch *WarCraft III* professional] told me that he thinks his career will be over by the time he's 23, 24 years old. A pro gamer's career is pretty brief, they may not necessarily have the time to change from one title to another." By the same token, such a rapid turnover should ensure that a new breed of *StarCraft II* players isn't far around the corner.

But, we ask Sams, will a mainstream TV audience ever really be able to follow this arcane, complex strategy game? "Part of it is, you've got to have great commentators. If you're broadcasting, much like if you're watching your favourite football team, there's people that come in that are new every day: the wife, the child of the hardcore fan. Well, they have to learn somewhere. It's complicated, but I don't know if it's really any more complicated than if you want to learn the inner workings of a football team, you know?"

"WE NEED TO GIVE WORLD OF WARCRAFT TIME TO BREATHE. A LOT OF SEQUELS DON'T PERFORM BECAUSE PLAYERS DON'T WANT TO LEAVE THE COMMUNITY AND THE THINGS THEY'VE DONE"

That afternoon sees BlizzCon starting to wind down. It's been a quieter day: the panels have been less noisy and thronged (excepting the one about the WarCraft film), while the official trading card game area has been packed with contented players all day.

The convention will have an appropriate climax in a few hours' time, in the arena. Mohr's one bad joke of the evening will be met with a sarcastic "LOL" from the circle; Blizzard's house band Level 70 Elite Tauren Chieftain will bring the house down with a set of *WOW*-themed comedy metal; the Video Games Live orchestra will perform some fine scores from the back catalogue. But it's this afternoon lull that will linger in the memory, a moment when an improbable air of normality descends on this extraordinary event. The air of mild tension – between *StarCraft* and *WarCraft*, between Blizzard's freedom and its responsibilities, between the 13,000 dedicated fans in here and the nine million hungry mouths out there – seems to have dissipated. BlizzCon 2007 is at peace with itself.

In the press room, none other than Home Alone star Macauly Culkin is leaning against the wall, chatting with a gaggle of friends and Blizzard staff about *WOW*. Kaplan's wife is standing alone at a *Lich King* demo pod, where she's been happily playing her husband's game for much of the day. Outside in the corridor, Blizzard's vice president of creative development (for which read 'story guru and idol to thousands') Chris Metzen is sat on a bench, deep in conversation with someone. It could be a colleague, it could be a journalist, it could be a fan. This being BlizzCon, there's no way of knowing. And for the moment at least, it doesn't seem to matter at all.







From top: Frank Pearce, co-founder and executive vice president for product development; Jeff Kaplan, lead designer on *World Of WarCraft*; Paul Sams, chief operating officer



Photography David Levene

Grind designs

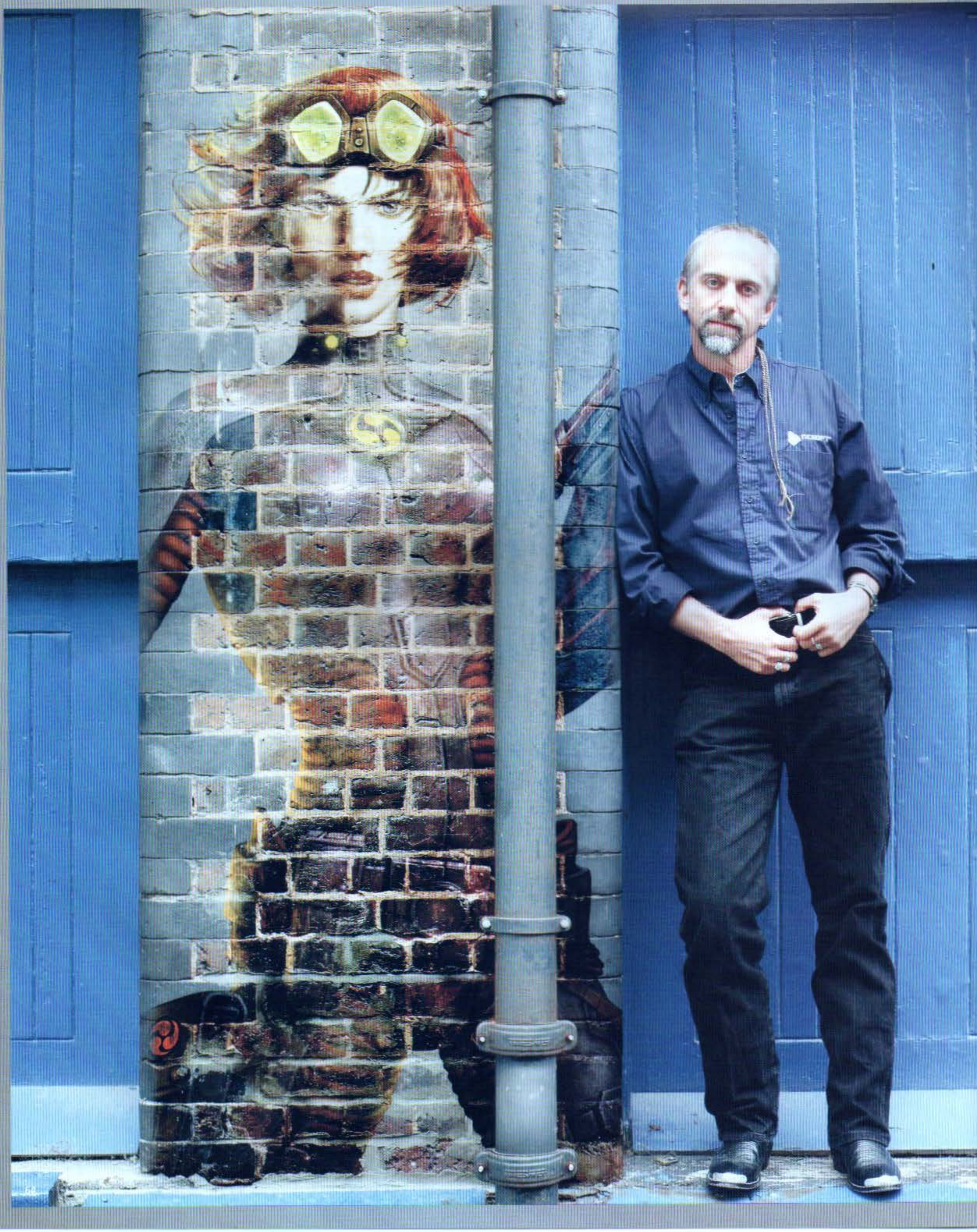
Weary of the level treadmill, the father of the modern MMO hopes to wipe the slate clean with Tabula Rasa



U*ltima Online* may not have been the first MMO, but it has done much to define the way they've developed. Released in 1997, its model of a large, richly realised persistent world shared by thousands of players at once, the slow grind of character development and an in-game economy hadn't been achieved on the same scale before by a commercial game. "It was by far the biggest selling game I've ever done," says its creator **Richard Garriott**, architect of the *Ultima* series of RPGs. "It has sold ten times more than every *Ultima* combined, and it's the most important game I've been involved with. But for the features we tried to do there was no model to follow. We made it up as we went along."

Ten years later, Garriott is on the promotional circuit for a new, sci-fi tinged MMO, *Tabula Rasa*. His central point is that *Tabula Rasa* (which means 'blank slate') has been created to address a number of design failings he has identified in MMOs. And, in the process, he believes *Tabula Rasa* will advance the form that, by accident or with intent, he did so much to delineate.

TITLE: **TABULA RASA**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NCSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **DESTINATION GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q4 2007**



We meet at NCSoft's offices in Brighton during Develop. Garriott has just given the morning's keynote at the conference, detailing the failures of the MMO, and he's quick to launch into a broadly similar account with us, putting forward three key ways *Tabula Rasa* will improve on them.

First: "Most MMOs have degenerated down to this turn-based whack-a-mole where damage over time is the primary game mechanic. I think this is not a good method going into the future," he says, surprisingly genially. So *Tabula Rasa* has an active combat system, a melding of firstperson shooter controls, use of cover and targeting enemy weakpoints with RPG stat calculations.

Second: "Most MMO creatures respawn right where they were the last time somebody killed them, and they don't do much other than to wait there until you come to farm them." So *Tabula Rasa* features 'dynamic battlefields', spaces that feature AI- and script-driven battles between the game's factions for territory and command posts.

Third: "Most MMO stories are thin. You pretty much ignore the story in missions and do the kill count or the fetch-and-carry demanded of you to advice through the level grind." So *Tabula Rasa* features a variety of conflicting missions that require moral or tactical choices about how to proceed.

"These three key points I think are the pivotal advancements that will move forward not only *Tabula Rasa* as a game form, but frankly the genre of MMOs," he says finally as he begins to demonstrate the game in action. We see an area called Foreas, which looks much like a standard MMO town, with NPCs standing ready to give missions and act as shops. Its conscious distance from the usual RPG medieval fantasy – perhaps even *Ultima*-inspired – setting is telling. Foreas is characterised by drab, brownish colours; weaponry, at least in the early game, is gun-based; and the militaristic clothing is more Battlestar Galactica than *Baldur's Gate*.



The story follows the attempts of the few survivors of a newly invaded and overrun Earth to survive against an evil alien horror called The Bane. "The only good news is that you and I and all the other subscribers to *TR* are miraculously going to survive," says Garriott, explaining that the humans find, just in time, remnants of technology made by an ancient alien race called the Eloh that allow them to escape their fate through a wormhole. And through that wormhole they find other races also fighting to survive.

The first surprise is the reason why, initially, players will only be able to take human characters. "Fictionally it's important that it's really you, the survivor of the devastation of the Earth who has gone off to make the decisions you encounter," explains Garriott. "You're not roleplaying some





"MMO MAKERS SAY WE CAN'T HAVE A STORY BECAUSE NO ONE CAN WIN. I SAY THAT IN SINGLEPLAYER GAMES LOTS OF PEOPLE WIN – JUST NOT IN FRONT OF EACH OTHER"





The variety of monsters and devices such as shield generators, weak points and dropships that litter *Tabula Rasa*'s environments lend it more tactical depth than the automata found in most MMOs do, but it's no *Halo*

alternate persona." In other words, Garriott has distanced *Tabula Rasa* even from the most basic of RPG tenets. "If you're playing a game where your role was Conan you'd expect to make the decisions that Conan would make to properly play that role," he continues. "In our case, we wanted you to make decisions because we were going to make judgements on you and change the way the game unfolds."

After all, story is important to *Tabula Rasa*, because in this MMO, despite the concurrent existence of thousands of other players, everyone is meant to feel like they're at the centre of the game. "In solo games you get to be very special – you get to save the universe," says Garriott. "But most MMO makers basically abandon story – they say that we can't have a story because no one can win. But I say that in singleplayer games lots of people win – they just don't win in front of each other." So Garriott intends to use instances, specific areas of the world made private for solo play or for parties of players to allow them to feel more involved in the story.

"In most MMOs the reason for instanced spaces is for your private opportunity to kill boss monsters to



The Bane has a familiar Aliens-inspired insectoid appearance, but friendly races show more creative flair. Environments revealed so far demonstrate a fair degree of diversity, but not much originality



Players are able to experiment with skillsets by cloning their character at every point they have chosen a new job specialisation, which negates the need to start over again from scratch



get the rare drop," he explains. "I think it's a perfectly suitable use of an instance, but I think it undersells them." So *Tabula Rasa*'s instances are more detailed and reactive to player action than the usual MMO instances so that they tell its story with greater power. For example, one mission sees players destroying an enormous fusion plant in a spectacular

"I THINK THE ONLY CHALLENGES THAT ARE ACTUALLY INTERESTING ARE THE ONES WHERE IT'S DEBATABLE WHAT YOU OUGHT TO DO"

explosion in an instance. "The proper or good use of an instance in an MMO is to do very detailed puzzle solving, storytelling and climactic events that make you feel that you've really accomplished something – unlike most MMOs. We save the running over the finish line for you, and leave the storytelling to say you're the most important person in the universe."

The mission plots themselves are similarly bolstered and designed to be morally ambiguous, a series of what Garriott calls ethical parables. "Most MMOs and RPGs have the same kind of plot," he explains, outlining the usual tale of the big bad guy sitting in the last map waiting for players to become heroes by killing him. "Not only do I find these kinds of stories boring after the first few times, I've retold them a few times in my early career," he says, slightly ruefully. Now he looks to more sophisticated stories which explore not physical journeys and quests but internal struggles. "I think that every interesting story puts you into a circumstance where you're thinking that the outcome isn't exactly obvious, and the only challenges that are actually interesting are the ones where it's debatable what you ought to do. If it's climb the next step, and the next, and so on, then you're back to what I think is the current state of MMOs, the level grind."





So *Tabula Rasa*'s missions will sometimes be at odds with each other. Completing one might put you in a difficult position with another faction, and simply doing whatever you're told isn't necessarily the best approach. For instance, when asked in a mission to cut off a supply of illegal drugs to allied soldiers, choosing to obey results in reducing morale and supporting corruption within the ranks. But keeping the supply going also has complex results. Such decisions will be reflected in the world by the way NPCs react to players: saving prisoners from a prison colony might mean that those prisoners will come back, at some point, to help the player and other friendly NPCs. "You have to live with the ramifications of these choices, and I think it makes it a much more interesting and compelling world to live in," says Garriott.

We travel to an instanced area called Eloh Vale. There are rumours that members of the Eloh survive here, despite the general belief that they were eradicated long ago. The narrative has players visit to find out more, and The Bane are here to investigate, too. The art style here contrasts markedly with that at Foreas, with smooth planes of silver-grey rock, green trees and curved white alien structures. Garriott works his character through the enemy forces, over a bridge and up to a forcefield apparently powered by the life force of a humanoid figure suspended in the air. Beyond the forcefield is the answer to the rumours, but to progress through, players must choose what to do. If one of the NPCs in your party isn't sacrificed to uphold the forcefield, The Bane will overrun the section, but it means killing off a character with whom players will have been allowed to develop strong empathy.

Eloh Vale also demonstrates *Tabula Rasa*'s active combat system. Put simply, many aspects of it are a lot like a thirdperson shooter. The screen interface is noticeably less cluttered than many MMOs. It has a radar display, communications window and health bars, but the shortcut 'tray' at the bottom of the screen, which might normally contain ten or 15 different skills, is composed of just two – one for the right mouse button and one for the left. And at the centre of the screen is a wide aiming reticule. Click your mouse at a creature in its sights and it will be attacked with ranged weapons, and it subtly tracks whatever was most recently targeted.

Later in the game, more exotic weaponry appears, such as cryogenic net guns, which can allow for a finishing move by occasionally freezing an enemy that will shatter if kicked. To maintain a sense of pace, *Tabula Rasa* also features an XP bonus



Reading runes

Logos is a pictographic language devised by Garriott that has been left by the ancient Eloh to communicate their special powers. In effect, it's a series of runes representing specific words that can be chained together to create spells. For instance, finding the Logos symbols for 'friends', 'summon' and 'here' will cast the power Reinforcements, in a similar system found in the likes of *Ultima Underworld*. The language is incorporated throughout the world, such as on buildings, illuminating the game's backstory and creating Mines of Moria-style gateway obstacles that require learning the requisite symbols.

Naturally, the system will also include secret combinations of symbols to reward semantic experiments. Garriott expects that player 'emergent behaviour' in the form of such spellcasting experimentation will be popular, and intends the game to support it strongly.



The Bane army includes enemies such as the flying Predator, which isn't as manoeuvrable as it might appear, and the Tripod-esque Stalker, which can drop a highly powerful plasma bomb



multiplier that increases the longer the player stays in danger before resting.

"We're not trying to be a firstperson shooter – it really is a roleplaying game," clarifies Garriott, attacking a group of Bane units. But instead of standing still and trading shots, he dodges and manoeuvres around the environment, with a marker displaying the direction hits are coming from. Crucially, the hit marker also changes colour depending on what cover the character is placed in – red for fully exposed, yellow for partially covered – indicating reduced damage. Meanwhile, enemies are also manoeuvring to take best advantage of the terrain.

Nevertheless, hits show the damage scored. "It's still all roleplaying, but it affects tactics – it affects where I want to be," says Garriott. "With most MMOs where you engage each other by highlighting each other you're ignoring the 3D world because you're playing the shortcut bar to do your maximum damage over time. And that is a statistics game, not an immersive environmental game. In *Tabula Rasa* you just worry about two pieces of data – aim and cover – and what's happening in the world around you, and it makes it a far more immersive experience."

As he progresses through Eloh Vale, the plot unfolds more like an action game than the static series of encounters usually found in MMOs. Enemy dropships appear to deposit groups of new enemies, and some are placed within orange bubble-shaped shields that are impervious to weapons. It's evidently designed to create an experience rather than a leaden progression through a space. "We've tried to create the spawns, as well as individual AIs, to force you to respond tactically and in a unique way,"

"IF YOU HAVE A FRIEND WHO'S CONSIDERABLY BEHIND YOU ON THE STORY ARC, YOU CAN PLAY TOGETHER, EVEN WITH A SUBSTANTIAL LEVEL OF DISPARITY, AND BOTH CONTRIBUTE"



Each base has a control point located somewhere inside it. If taken, Bane defence systems will be disabled, and dropships loaded with friendly NPCs will arrive to hold it against counterattack, even if players leave

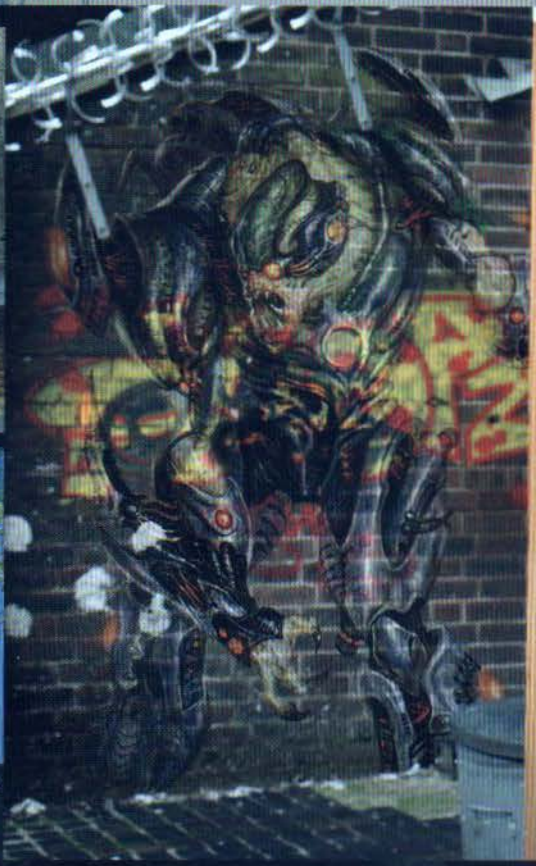
explains Garriott. "In most MMOs the monsters get tougher, but all that really means is that you wait until you toughen yourself to beat them. But they rarely make you change your behaviour." He demonstrates the strategy necessary for tackling a bubble shield: running into it to take it out from the inside.

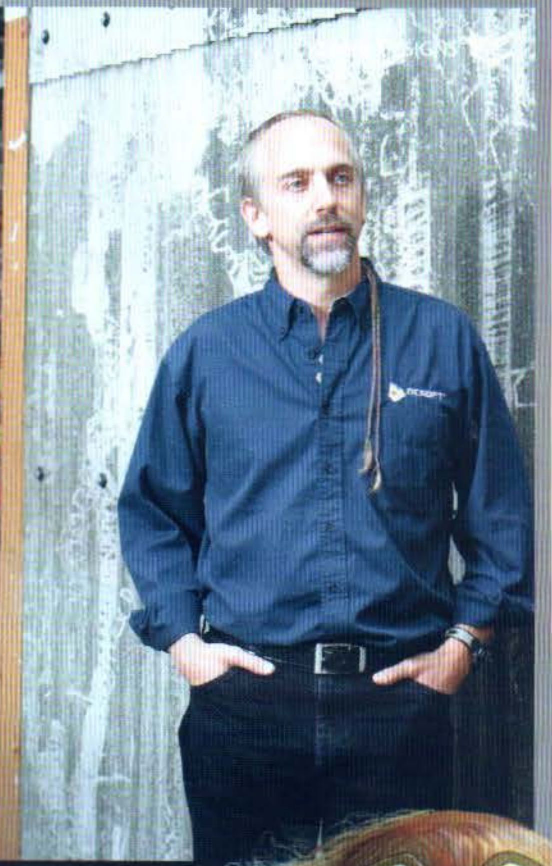
The result of this focus on action-based tactics is a reduced focus on level as a measure of player power and overall success in the game. "We use story evolution as our primary measure of success," says Garriott. "So if you have a friend who's considerably behind you on the story arc, you can play together, even with a substantial level





Logos powers, seen being cast above, are taken from a lexicon of a few thousand pictographs. Each symbol must be found in the world and set into characters' 'tabula rasas' to use





disparity, and both feel like you're contributing to success or failure." Instead of the balancing of most MMOs, in which facing monsters three levels above you generally leads to death, and three levels below insufficient XP reward, Garriott intends for *Tabula Rasa* players to easily be able to face opponents five levels higher and, with skill, even ten levels higher.

Adding such new dynamism to an MMO requires new attention to AI. Garriott claims that most MMO makers essentially ignore it, figuring that the intelligent bustle created by other players running around is adequate. But since most other players tend to do their own thing and ignore each other, for Garriott they hardly represent the interactive AI that's required to bring an MMO world alive. He looks towards the world of action games for a solution: "There's some great AI work in games like *Medal Of Honor*, which is one of the first times I saw really good AI in a firstperson shooter. But actually, AI is one of the least well-utilised features of a computer in gaming. So I'm frankly surprised that we've seen huge investments of development in things like 3D graphics technology, which continues to amaze me, but AI is one of those largely untapped resources. It's one of the next really important areas to start pushing."

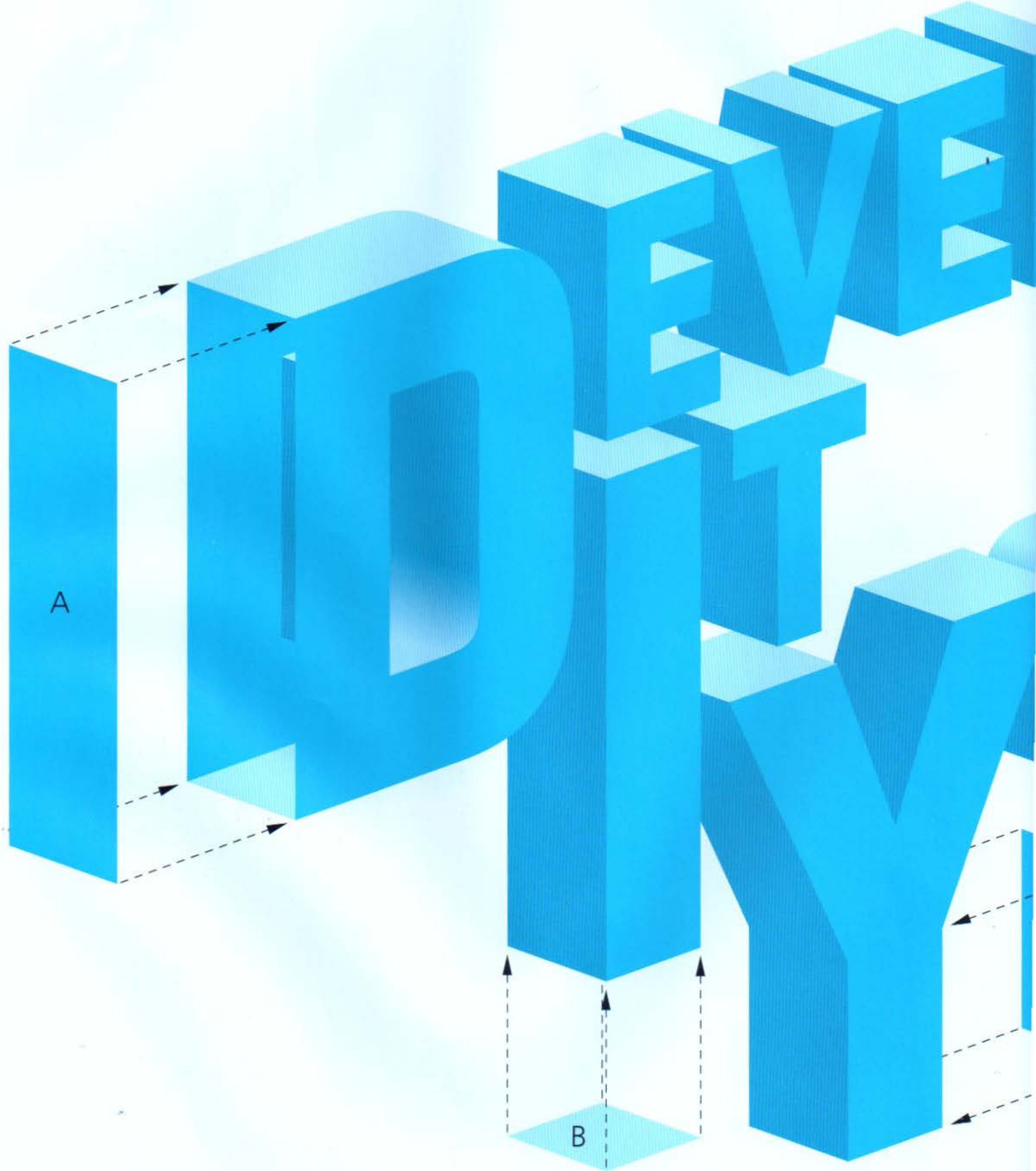
One of the ways AI manages to create a sense of a more vibrant world is through 'dynamic battlefields', a constantly shifting world depicting conflict between the Bane and allied forces. Areas will switch between being held by the two forces, whether aided by players or not. Those deep in Bane territory might switch only periodically, but those on the frontlines will change often, and each base will be defended and attacked differently to provide a variety of tactics. Players might want to synchronise an attack on an enemy-held base with a wave of allied forces to make it easier. Meanwhile, players will witness smaller-scale skirmishes as they travel around that do a lot to show the breadth of the conflict they're involved in.

It's obvious that the point of Garriott's three attacks on typical MMO design centres on creating a more cohesive, more engaging world. Each of his solutions attempt to prevent players from being torn out of it by the need to think about statistics or simplistic quest designs. And from the scale of some of the encounters it offers, *Tabula Rasa* goes some way to realising this. But the static nature of some of the towns might suggest that it won't go all the way to revolutionising the genre. Like Funcom's *Age Of Conan*, its attempts to make MMOs more immersive will only go so far until the base MMO design of character stats, XP rewards and long dungeon crawls hunting for loot makes itself known.

Garriott remains confident that *Tabula Rasa* will successfully redefine the genre, however. If it's a reaction to the games that he had such a large part in creating, could it be seen as a form of redemption? "Well, it sort of is. I like storytelling, and I actually felt when I finished the *Ultima* series that we'd become barely competent storytellers. There was a lot of work to be done to be worthy of being called anything like literature. I'd like to believe that with *Tabula Rasa* we're making some small steps toward that. But with *Ultima Online* when we brought this great new feature of online, even we had to abandon it, basically because we just weren't quite sure how to do it. But the thing I've been stunned by is that in the last ten years no one else has managed to figure it out."

Two worlds

The final *Tabula Rasa* is famously version two of the game. The original was an attempt to fuse western and eastern aesthetics to create an MMO that would have equal appeal in both territories. But it wasn't exactly a success. "We brought in a lot of artists from Korea to make this hybrid vision, and what we ended up creating was no one's vision. It was the vision of compromises, where everything we Americans thought of as eastern, the Koreans would say wasn't quite right," recalls Garriott. The grittier result of the redesign, which Garriott claims didn't affect the mechanical design of the game, might seem somewhat uncompromisingly western, but he's confident Koreans will also find it appealing. That said, some changes will be made for Asian versions, namely in character designs – the square-jawed western heroes will be exchanged for "skinny little computer nerds who survive because of their inner strength".


A
B



WITH EACH OF THE BIG THREE CONSOLE MANUFACTURERS RELEASING TOOLS AND OFFERING DISTRIBUTION TO INDEPENDENT DEVELOPERS, THE HOMEBREW SCENE OFFERS OPPORTUNITY LIKE NEVER BEFORE

"I think that consumers as creators, or the creative community, is a reality of a creative medium moving forward," says **Chris Satchell**, general manager of Microsoft's game developer group. "There are so many amazing ideas in the community that go undeveloped because there is a lack of the right tools and distribution channels."

It would appear that this is a matter of considerable change. Quite suddenly, it seems, each of the big three console manufacturers is promoting a growing acknowledgement of the homebrew community, putting together apparently egalitarian schemes to help democratise console development. Yet, while all have described their intentions in similar terms, their various efforts to empower the hobbyist developer have taken very distinct routes.

The acceleration of the homebrew development community correlates directly to the ever-increasing spread of the internet. Interconnectivity has enabled rapid communication between like-minded types, fostered communities, accelerated the sharing of technology, and opened up new distribution methods. As you would expect, among all the possible gaming platforms, the PC has had a big headstart in this respect and, with its few restrictions on access, the internet's Flash gaming community has become a hotbed of ingenuity (see **E**177).



The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai was one of the prize-winning entries in Microsoft's Dream Build Play competition. It is the single-handed effort of James Silva, a recent graduate and Java programmer



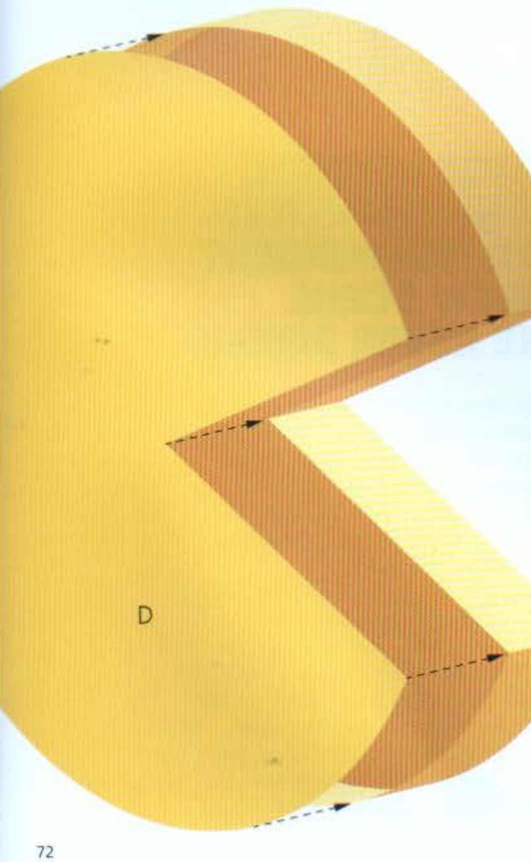
Console gaming has always been tougher for the indie scene to crack, not least because it has been substantially slower to find its way online. Additionally, unlike the PC, developing for consoles has previously required a much greater degree of direct co-operation from manufacturers: except for a clutch of industrious hackers, only the manufacturers can grant access to their machines through proprietary programming interfaces. Yet, suddenly, we are seeing a universally professed enthusiasm for nurturing indie development – Microsoft has XNA, a paid-for development and distribution service, Nintendo has WiiWare, a means of publishing indie content and making it available to the Wii's entire audience, and Sony brought Linux to PS3 with the intention of encouraging individuals to create applications for it.

"Because we have plans for having Linux on board [the PS3], we also recognise Linux programming activities," said the head of the software platform division of SCEI, **Izumi Kawanishi**, in an interview last year. "Other than game studios tied to official developer licences, we'd like to see various individuals participate in content creation for the PS3."

The power of homebrew development will of course be familiar to Sony – besides the fact that it remains one of the major forces sustaining its PSP (see 'Can't beat 'em'), the company was one of the first to bring home console development to the notice of the wider gaming audience with the release of a PlayStation development kit in 1997.

"Clearly part of our desire to open up our hardware was to respond to the enormous interest from consumers, students and academic institutions who wanted to access the power of PlayStation," says Sony's president of technology, **Paul Holman**. "The decision was driven by those in the company who had grown up with access to the Amigas, Spectrums, Atari 800s and BBC Micros."

"PART OF OUR DESIRE TO OPEN UP OUR HARDWARE WAS TO RESPOND TO THE ENORMOUS INTEREST FROM CONSUMERS, STUDENTS AND ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS"



Called Net Yaroze, meaning 'Let's Create', the kit was available through mail order at the price of $750. For that sum, an aspiring developer could get his hands on a debugging PlayStation, connect it up to a PC and start programming using a package of proprietary tools – cut-down versions of the more expensive tools that professional developers were using. Net Yaroze's lifetime saw increasing levels of support for thirdparty tools, like Codewarrior and Lightwave 3D, as well as dedicated Usenet groups.

"We had to manufacture a special variant of the console and provide cables and software for the PC," says Holman. "It was costly and complicated – but we saw amazing results in terms of the games and ideas from the community that grew up around the project. PlayStation 2 Linux built upon the lessons of Net Yaroze – the PC was no longer necessary, and a standard consumer unit could be upgraded, much reducing the cost – although we carried out the work of porting Linux in-house. PS2 Linux is still widely used in universities across the globe, and the industry overall benefited from waves of people who had familiarity with modern console development environments, and could bring their ideas and skills to games companies. Many game developers today started out by having Net Yaroze game demos on the cover disc of the Official Playstation Magazine."

Despite distribution via mag cover disc, however, Net Yaroze projects would always

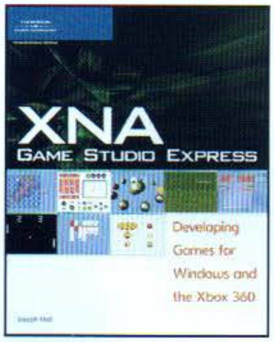
CAN'T BEAT 'EM

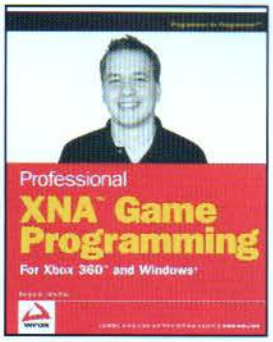
Amid all the big machines, Sony's PSP is now to be used in universities to teach game development, with the same tools used by commercial developers. The scheme was announced at the Develop Conference, and allows universities to buy the hardware development kits at a discount. The big distinction between this and something such as Net Yaroze is that the kits will not be stripped-down versions, but will come with all programming tools and applications needed to create a marketable game – there will even be a clone version of the professional development website and its forums. In a wider sense, the most interesting future possibilities may be with portable consoles as their browser capabilities increase and homebrew use becomes more regulated. Even the Wonderswan had Wonderwitch, a publisher-supported 128Mb flash card – exactly what DS homebrew relies on. Time has proved Nintendo and Sony can't control these communities. Might as well join them?

CODE BREAKER

"Managed code targets a virtual platform," says Hall, explaining its comparative benefits and failings next to native code. "Not Windows, not MacOS, not Linux – an imaginary system. Managed languages are typically compiled into some intermediate format which represents the machine code of the imaginary machine."

When the program reaches the end user, on whatever system they are using, the intermediate code is compiled on the fly into native code of the real machine using a process known as just-in-time (JIT) compilation. The advantage of this is that the same code will have greater compatibility between dissimilar systems, Hall explains: "Since managed code is compiled just before it's actually run, the JIT compiler can specifically target whichever machine is running it. Your specific CPU has special instructions for math functions? We'll use it. Your specific CPU has some issues with certain hardware registers in certain scenarios? We'll avoid them. Managed code tries to handle the boring, repetitive tasks for the developer. But those features don't come for free."





Joseph B Hall's book (left) explains in greater depth the intricacies of 360 development, while Benjamin Nitschke (right), lead programmer at exDream studios, has long been an active member of the XNA development community

struggle to reach a commercial audience beyond its core of enthusiasts. It is in this respect that the indie development community has undergone fundamental change: with the increasing connectivity of successive generations of consoles, and the adoption of broadband, indie coding projects have the opportunity to achieve mainstream success like never before. The appearance of online marketplaces and the rapidity of peer review through web 2.0 applications have coalesced to create an irresistible ground for independent development.

Digital distribution is by itself a huge boon for the indie development scene, and it is no surprise that these are the terms in which Nintendo has outlined its WiiWare service. Delivering games from start-ups, independents and established companies alike, WiiWare is a distribution platform that allows developers to sell a game without the costs of storage media (discs or cartridges), packaging or shipping, substantially cutting down the overheads for such projects. As **Rob Saunders**, Nintendo Europe's head of PR, says: "Mr Iwata has for a while now hinted about downloadable content: that we want to help young, promising developers overcome the limitations of small budgets and team sizes to bring their games to the Wii."

The emphasis from Nintendo is on WiiWare as a means of avoiding the thorny problem of commercial liability: that many games are doomed forever to the drawing board because it's not obvious they will turn a profit when presented to a mainstream audience. Games that are not commercially viable in the current marketplace will become so via WiiWare's minimising of extraneous production costs.

However, while it's clear that Nintendo is courting the untapped potential of small-budget development, WiiWare neither intends to establish a community of developers nor offers any shortcuts regarding development itself – if Nintendo has ambitions to expand in this direction, then the firm is keeping them to itself for the moment. It would seem the obvious thing to do: although the ultimate role of such indie development communities in the bigger picture of console gaming is still being formed, it's clear that the console manufacturers' decision to harness and shape this force of creativity could easily have a profound impact on the success of their systems. Encouraging indie development on a console has benefits beyond training a new generation of programmers to use your tools and systems: the creative communities themselves have a huge commercial pull, as proven by their many internet analogues – YouTube being the obvious paradigm.

Holman is cagey about what Sony's next step will be in this regard: "Its very early stages so far – but clearly we are considering a number of web 2.0 options. PS3 is still a young platform – opening the platform to a wider range of Linux distributions was an important way to give consumers a free and easy way to dabble with Linux and harness the PS3's processing capabilities. We're carefully nurturing this first stage, but we have many ideas for the future, too."

For the moment, however, homebrew development on PS3 will be restricted to the console's Linux component – there are not, as yet, opportunities for individuals to create games to run directly on the PS3's native operating system, or distribute them over PlayStation Network.

"In terms of the Linux environment, there are no barriers for application developers, other than that their users must have installed Linux," says Holman. "However, to make applications for more general distribution to consumers, our normal licensed developer programme is available."

A similar situation, creating distinct boundaries between homebrew and professional content, has existed for those developing Xbox 360 games – but it is something that Microsoft appears to be increasingly keen to change, taking the lead among the big three in its engagement with the indie development scene. Already offering both a means of distribution and affordable access to tools geared towards 360 development, Microsoft's intention is to add another tier to this scheme – one that will bridge the gap between professional and amateur, giving the homebrew community the same access to Xbox Live Arcade as professional developers.

Last year, Microsoft released XNA, a free-to-use software development kit for Xbox 360 and PC. A powerful sense of community spirit



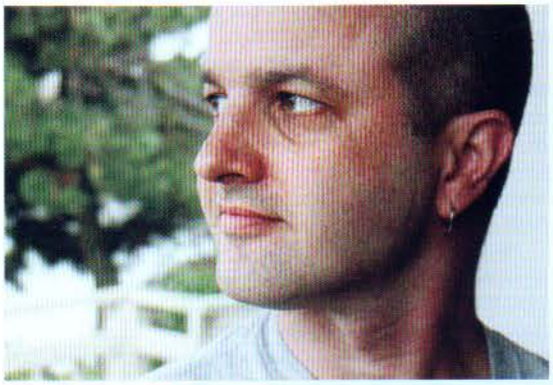


Two fondly remembered Yaroze games that made Official PlayStation Mag's disc were *Terra Incognita* (below) and *Blitter Boy* (above). The latter won its creator, Chris Chadwick, a job at Codemasters





Entries to the recent Dream Build Play competition were of such quality that Microsoft chose two winners. *Blazing Birds*, designed by grocery store clerk David Flook, was good enough to earn him the prize of a publishing contract



Technical director of Torpex games, Jamie Fristrom, may be using XNA, but his background is far from amateur – he was the technical director and designer responsible for the much-lauded swinging system used in *Spider-Man 2*

has already formed among XNA developers, exchanging information and helping one another (see 'Care to share'), and thanks to the increasing support by thirdparty products, like the Torque X 3D engine, Microsoft's indie-nurturing strategy has already begun to yield impressive results.

"Everyone can create 360 games for the first time," says XNA veteran and lead programmer for exDream studios, **Benjamin Nitschke**. "Thanks to the XNA framework it is also much simpler to write Xbox 360 and PC cross-platform games than it was before. XNA covers a lot of cool tools like XACT for audio creation and co-operates nicely with existing tools to create graphic shaders. Thanks to the content pipeline it is also easy for beginners just to drag in some textures and 3D models and they get imported and converted to the best format automatically for you."

While you can't publish your creations straight to Xbox Live Arcade, XNA has its Creators Club, accessible with a subscription costing $99 (£49). The Creators Club then gives you unlimited access to the community's games and the ability to publish and promote your own non-commercial efforts within this reasonably restricted environment.

"It makes sense for the Xbox 360 team, which is obviously involved in the XNA development, but it is a bit of a hassle for the indie developer," says Nitschke. "The problem is that you can't share XNA games with your non-developer friends, since they won't have the club subscription. Even if they have it, you have to give them your whole source code and let them compile the games themselves. On the PC you can freely distribute and use XNA like the DirectX framework with no limitations, but on the Xbox 360 it is more or less just for yourself and the community."

Joseph B Hall, developer and author of a forthcoming book on XNA Game Studio Express, suggests why Microsoft might have initially taken such a route: "By restricting the

CARE TO SHARE

The XNA scene has a strong commitment to open source – Nitschke is himself involved in this, having produced several highly polished prototypes which he's distributed with the intention that others build upon his work. "Many people use my XNA games for learning and to start their own project," he explains. "For example, the *Dungeon Quest* game is a prime candidate if you want to create your own roleplaying game, but have no clue yet where to begin – even if the final game turns out to be completely different."







(From top) *Dungeon Quest*, *Rocket Racer* and *XNA Racing Game*. Nitschke intends his games to be used as templates from which others can create more fully fledged designs. His blog, at abi.exdream.com, is a useful resourse for aspiring XNA auteurs, demystifying the complex game dev process and giving in-depth, point-by-point analyses of code

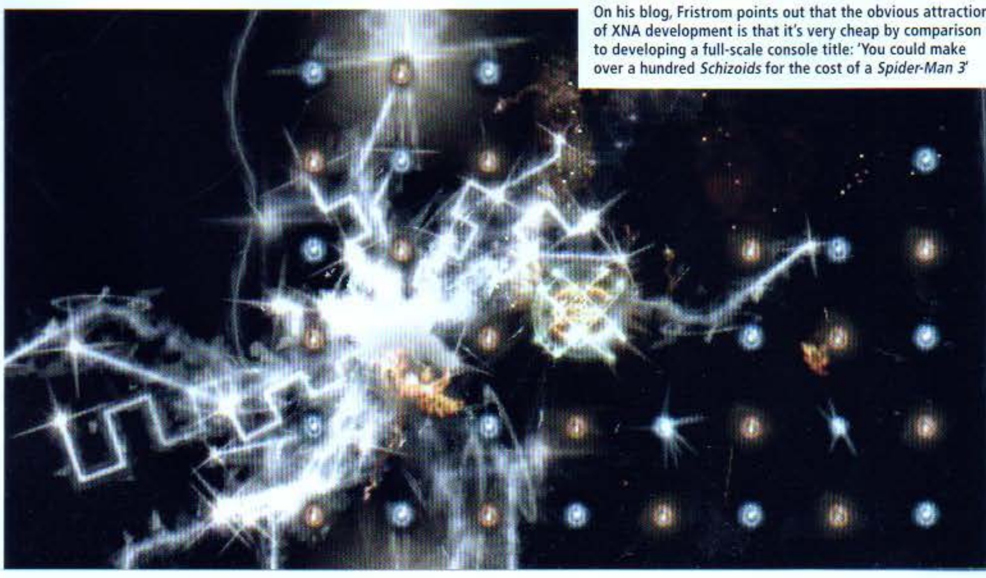


production of XNA titles, Microsoft is protecting its partners' investments as well as ensuring that the quality of released titles meets some minimum standards, providing a better experience for the end user.

"Not just anyone can get their hands on the full commercial 360 development kit. It's reserved for established game development houses, whose ideas and final product must pass Microsoft's scrutiny and stringent quality control processes. Assuming that you meet the qualifications, and you get approval from Microsoft to purchase an official development kit, you'll be looking at spending around $10,000 (£4,900) for the privilege."

As you might expect, XNA's free-to-use toolset, Game Studio Express, is somewhat cut-back by comparison. Nitschke explains: "Since the framework is so new and there are limitations on the 360 side, you are currently not able to do any network code or access hardware like the DVD drive or soundcard yourself, which limits your possibilities."

XNA's other limitation is more technical in nature – currently, it only officially supports C#, a managed programming language. The significance of this lies in the trade-off between the language's accessibility and the speed at which it runs (see 'Code breaker'). XNA developer and technical director of Torpex Games, **Jamie Fristrom**, explains: "While C# on the PC is almost as fast as



On his blog, Fristrom points out that the obvious attraction of XNA development is that it's very cheap by comparison to developing a full-scale console title: 'You could make over a hundred *Schizoids* for the cost of a *Spider-Man 3*'



According to Microsoft's Katie Stone Perez, speaking at GDC, games need to fulfil six criteria to be considered for distribution on Live Arcade: innovation, gameplay, visuals, multiplayer, marketplace interaction and global appeal



native code on the PC, C# on the Xbox is definitely slower than native code on the Xbox, so we're not at the point where we're going to have a *Halo*-killer written in C# yet."

That 'yet' is pretty significant – Fristrom is quick to evangelise C# and XNA. He has reason to be optimistic about XNA's potential given that Torpex Games is one of the first companies to make the leap from the XNA community to commercial distribution on Xbox Live Arcade with its co-operative title, *Schizoid*. "The learning curve is so shallow you can make your game really quickly," says Fristrom. "Because C# is simply a much better language than C or C++ it continues to make you more productive all the way up to ship. There's no reason why you can't ship a

"C# ON THE XBOX IS SLOWER THAN NATIVE CODE, SO WE'RE NOT AT THE POINT WHERE WE'RE GOING TO HAVE A HALO-KILLER WRITTEN IN C# YET"

commercial game with XNA – we're going to. Although XNA really only officially supports C# right now, some clever guys have done more with it. Generally, the people who are saying: 'You can't make a real game in C#' are the same sorts of people who, 15 years ago, said: 'You can't make a real game in C'."

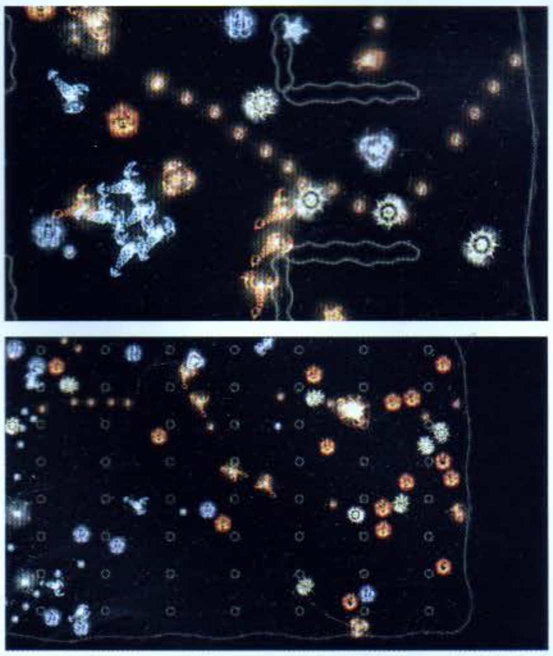
While *Schizoid*'s commercial release is currently an anomaly among XNA titles, it is a path that is likely to become increasingly well-trodden, with Microsoft intending to remove many of the restrictions. Hindrances like the lack of support for network code are liable to change with the release of the successor to Game Studio Express in the coming months.

"For the first release of XNA Game Studio we wanted to focus on getting great tools into the hands of the community and taking the unprecedented step of giving them development access to their retail console," explains Satchell, Microsoft's own XNA evangelist-extraordinaire. "The second release will focus on enabling games to be built that could be shipped as either Xbox Live Arcade or retail titles. This is another big step, but still requires a publishing contract.

"For those developers who have a publishing agreement in place, we will be making additional libraries available which support the full Xbox Live feature set including matchmaking, Achievements and leaderboards into their games. These approved games will also have the ability to get certified and distributed electronically via Xbox Live Marketplace. Having this level of consistency in our offerings and the ability to take a game 'all the way' will really open up avenues for the community to showcase their creativity even wider."

Between this and the recent Dream Build Play contest, in which budding developers competed to win an Xbox Live Arcade publishing contract, it's clear that Microsoft is keen to see individuals use its tools to create games of professional quality, and directly funnel these amateur ambitions into commercial products.

"We were so impressed with what the community created that we ended up awarding two first place prizes, both of which may become XBLA games," says Satchell, pointing out that the winners produced every aspect of the games themselves while holding down day jobs (one as a grocery store clerk, the other a Java programmer). "Given the number of entries that showcased innovative gameplay and overall quality,"



Schizoid is a co-op game built around the premise of colour-coded enemies. The exact details of its mechanic have yet to be released, but we can assume that players protect one another, each vulnerable to baddies of a specific colour

Satchell adds, "I wouldn't be surprised to see more of these games picked up by publishers at some point."

Satchell's ambition for XNA is an egalitarian one, certainly. "In the future," he says, "our vision is to open this up and allow members of the XNA Creators Club to share their games with the millions of people on Xbox Live." But, like Holman, Satchell is acutely aware that what benefits the indie community brings prosperity to the industry as a whole: "If you can make gaming more socially relevant by having timely, topical content, recommended and ranked by the community, you can draw more people in."

The measured strategy with which Microsoft has approached this task suggests that it doesn't view encouraging the indie scene as simply a matter of democratising development. The increasing power of the homebrew community is an inevitability that all three console manufacturers will have to recognise; though their efforts to engage with it may be an investment of considerable significance, the results will have profound effect upon their bottom line and the vitality of the industry as a whole.



BRIGHTON PEERS

WE MEET WITH FOUR BRITISH DEVELOPERS TO TALK ABOUT THE ART, THE SCIENCE, THE EDUCATION AND THE FUTURE OF VIDEOGAMES



It's the afternoon of the final day of Develop. For the first time during the conference the sun is shining, but the prior wind and rain, as well as hangovers from last night's Develop Awards, have taken their toll.

With a few bolstering coffees (and a Bloody Mary), we've retreated to a bar with **David Amor**, head of *Buzz* developer Relentless; **Nick Burton**, senior software engineer at Rare; **Chris Kingsley**, CTO of Rebellion and **Toby Barnes** of videogame consultancy Pixel Lab.

The new generation of consoles is now firmly established and videogames, from *Buzz* to *Halo 3*, *LittleBigPlanet* to *Crysis*, demonstrate more diversity in play styles and appeal than ever. So we wanted to find out what issues are on the minds of UK game creators right now, and how they feel about an industry that's both commonly celebrated for its creativity and economic productivity, and slammed as a morally reprehensible cultural outsider.

We lead in with a reference to Amor's presentation from earlier in the morning, in which he said: "It's tempting, but it's the wrong thing to do as game designers to just add new things."

So, how do you balance the need to reiterate games and your drive as a creative game designer?

David Amor: I think there's a real habit of game designers to try to make games for other game designers. It's really easy to make games for yourself or your peers, but it takes discipline to make them for people that you don't know or understand



DAVID AMOR

As head of Brighton-based Relentless Software, Amor created the *Buzz* series of quiz games for PS2 and has worked on Sony's EyeToy and *SingStar* games. He specialises in 'social games' designed to be played among friends or family in the living room without steep learning curves. His Develop talk discussed how hard it is to create games that aren't for gamers.



CHRIS KINGSLEY

Kingsley established Rebellion in 1992 with his brother Jason. The studio created the successful *Aliens Vs Predator* and owns the comic 2000AD. It has since developed games featuring Judge Dredd and Rogue Trooper. Having recently bought up studios including Core Design and Awesome, Rebellion is the largest independent game developer in Europe.



TOBY BARNES

Founder of digital media consultancy Pixel Lab, Barnes focuses on supporting the long-term development of the European videogame industry by running training programmes and events, and conducting research. Before Pixel Lab, he helped launch Emap's online group and created various entertainment websites heading MTV's interactive division.



NICK BURTON

Having spent four years researching 3D graphics in academia, Burton moved into games in 1998 and is now a senior software engineer at Rare. He has worked on many of its games over the last nine years, including *Starfox Adventures*, *Kameo* and most recently *Jetpac: Refuelled* for XBLA. He is also involved in Rare's relationship with academia.

completely – you have to make it for those people.

Nick Burton: I guess with *Jetpac* we were to a certain extent making it for ourselves, but we were also trying to tap into a new audience. I agree with David, because there's a lot of people that want something that they've seen before, or something that harks back. And then there are lots of younger people and kids that want something simplistic. *Jetpac* is so easy to play, and *Buzz* is even easier.



Photography: Nick Wilson

Have some of the lessons that David has learned through making *Buzz*, about thinking more carefully about your audiences rather than your own opinions, influenced you when you think about sequels?

Chris Kingsley: Some people just knock out the same game again and again, and they've built large companies around that. But other people like to innovate and how much you innovate and keep the same is an interesting problem. **I think from a creative point of view it's relatively easy to innovate. But from a sales point of view it's very difficult to innovate.** As an independent developer you have to sell your game to a publisher, which has to estimate the number of sales it will get. And the only way to do that is to compare it to a similar game that's out there already. So if you pitch something that's too different, too innovative, the sales people tend to estimate low and the game doesn't get made.

Toby Barnes: It's the same with the film industry – its sales figures are based on the performance of other films. But if you look at a graph of a studio's successes and failures it doesn't show steady growth. All of the studios show spikes and troughs, because often films that are made to match previous successes will tank. It's hard to judge a market on the performance of previous films.

CK: Sequels in movies you can generally bank on making 70 per cent of the takings of the original. But in games it's different. Sequels will generally do more than the originals. But the games industry is highly innovative while the movie industry is mostly fairly repetitive, and I think that's because of the medium. I think someone said that there are only about seven basic stories that you can ever tell, so every movie is a variation on a theme. With games there's more diversity. But even five years ago you were fairly limited with the type of games you could make. Now it's much, much more exciting, and there are a lot of people coming in because there are more accessible games for people, and some of them will transition up to the more hardcore games.

That's another thing that came up during David's talk – *Buzz* as a sort of 'gateway drug' to harder ones. Is it important for *Buzz* to introduce new audiences to videogames?

DA: I have no desire or feel no obligation to introduce people to new games – *Buzz* is certainly not designed to lead people into core games. I think it's fine to have a wide variety of games. That's OK – people are looking for different experiences in games, so I think it's fine to continue to make simple games, and there's enough out there

now to satisfy these new audiences.
CK: We're here to entertain people, and there are a lot of different forms of entertainment that people like. I think we can over-analyse what we're trying to do, because ultimately all we want is for people to enjoy themselves and buy our games.
TB: It's a semantic problem as well, because when we talk about film we all know what it is. But talking about games – *Grand Theft Auto, Brain Training, Buzz* – they're completely different experiences. We don't have a good method of explaining what a game is.
NB: Yeah, everything that isn't a 'AAA game' we call a 'casual game' – I'm sure *Buzz* is called a casual game.
DA: I don't call it a casual game, but people do…
NB: Exactly.
DA: There are so many differences between something EA would put on Pogo and something like *SingStar*. They're worlds apart. Just as a *Metal Gear Solid* fan might not play *Buzz*, it's a wrong assumption that someone that plays *Buzz* would play Windows *Solitaire*.

NB: It almost feels to me that if a game isn't aimed at a 20- or 30-something male then it's called a casual game a lot of the time.

TB: A lot of the big brand labels struggle even with the word 'game', because game means toy, means not useful, not creative, not culturally important. So you get 'interactive entertainment' because that's far more worthy-sounding.
NB: But sometimes people playing games don't label them as games. **My mother-in-law playing *Wii Sports* wasn't really aware it was a game. As far as she was concerned, she was just taking part in a family Sunday afternoon.**
CK: I think we have to bear in mind that games these days are accepted and part of culture. It's just another thing in people's lives and we're competing for their attention and entertainment dollar. But there are also people who haven't grown up with games as we have. They have a different perception, a fear, and they don't understand games. They don't know what they are, and it's why we're getting beaten up constantly on violence in games. You pick penny dreadfuls, which were novels in the 1800s that were lambasted for corrupting the youth. No one these days would even think they might be a problem. Games are just the latest thing, I guess.



Do you notice this attitude changing?
CK: Yes – what you're seeing is people in government that have grown up with games. And there's a lot more attention being paid to games by the government. It sees us as a very creative industry, and a financially successful one – a lot more so than film. There are a lot of subsidies for film in the UK and it doesn't contribute as much to UK PLC.
TB: But their argument is that these are cultural subsidies. They are breaks for cultural products to tell stories about the UK. One of the challenges we've got in games is to do this.
DA: But it seems to me that you'll get some way to getting support, and then policy or party changes and politicians will suddenly distance themselves, or demonstrate even greater support.
CK: Yeah, it's a bit of a love-hate relationship. There are people that push the boundaries in terms of censorship and this is actually probably part of their business model. And the situation with Take-Two is that they've have found that boundary.
TB: One of the challenges we have is finding content creators that can talk about what they do in more than just sales figures. Take Rockstar, for instance, which hasn't defended what it does in a critical or mature way. They just don't talk about what they do. It's hard to find people that explain what they do and why they do it.
CK: Is that because they're aren't many people in the industry that stand up and be recognised?



Rebellion's *Rogue Trooper* was the result of the studio having purchased 2000AD in, appropriately, 2000. It featured a number of fresh ideas, such as a cover system some time before *Gears Of War* was revealed, and upgradable weaponry

Is it because there still isn't really a critical language for games? Film enjoys philosophical and artistic discussion that videogaming has lacked.
NB: I think so, but the games industry is still so young. That sort of thing takes so long to develop.
DA: People seem to be quite sniffy about the games industry, and creative people look down on it. It's only recently that you've got that little bit in the newspaper next to the movie releases.
CK: I find it really bizarre that people don't understand how much of an all-encompassing art making games is. You think of the things we do that are just coincidental to making a game. We've got actors and dancers, and choreographers because we need them to move. We've got architects to build environments, sculptors who create characters, we've got painters who make textures, writers to write stories – interactive stories. We've got lighting guys. **We've got an amazing set of skills that we completely under-appreciate. I think computer games are the ultimate art-form.**
NB: Yeah – the reason I love the industry so much and entered into it in the first place is that it was the only place in the sciences where I'd be working with so many creative people, like you say, across the board.
CK: When I was doing chemistry at university and looking for a job, I'd go around the recruitment fairs and they'd say that they had openings for research chemists, and I wondered why I assumed that's what I wanted to do. Options for scientists to be creative seem to be minimal. And that was a real disappointment – I had



As a game aimed at a wider audience than just game enthusiasts, *Buzz* faced apathy from the specialist press when first announced. Its subsequent popularity flew in the face of such narrow-mindedness and has generated several sequels

to set up my own company, work with my brother. We had to create what we wanted to do by our bootstraps.

Now specialised university courses for videogames are being offered – is that a solution?

DA: I was speaking to a lecturer who freely admitted that the reason they call it a games course is that as soon as you put the 'games' word in the title people sign up in droves. You have to scrutinise exactly what it is that gets taught and whether it really has relevance to people wanting to get into games. And different games demand different skills; Flash skills aren't much use for production of a lot of what we do – you'd be better off with C++ and Maya. I think it's great that these courses have come about, but think there's a mixture of ones that genuinely prepare for a future in videogames and those that use the word as a mechanism for attracting students.

CK: The best courses are the ones that are done in conjunction with developers – where the universities come to us so we can give them advice about what we're looking for. But because the games industry is broader than just what we do, they need to prepare their students for a range of different things.

NB: Yeah, I used to work in academia before I came to the industry and my wife still does, and universities have faced a crisis recently getting bums on seats for computing courses. These courses have started to close, and people drop out because they realise that computing is difficult.

CK: Yes – damn difficult.

NB: And games are a nice thing to attach to make it a little more sexy, but because the courses have changed so quickly there are some bad examples, but it'll settle down. The thing we're doing at Rare is to give them some input – rather than just ignoring them, we're trying to help.

DA: I think it's hard for these courses to stay current. I remember being taught everything on a BBC Micro at school and was untouchable at it. So on my first day at work I said: "So, show me the BBC Micros," and there was nothing but these PC things!

CK: It's difficult for courses to get the latest hardware – to be honest it's hard for developers to get the latest hardware.

TB: And you have the situation where developers need new employees to do cutting-edge work on day one, so how are the universities expected to keep up with that? There are three types of courses. The computer science and fine art courses that people like EA say are the only places they look for graduates from, before putting them through a year of training. Then the courses that focus on game programming and are starting to get accredited – though last year only four were, and there's about 350 courses with the word 'game' in their title. **And the third course type is game studies, with a bit of programming, a bit of art, a bit of design. And students at the end are useless.** It's like media studies during the '90s, and a lot of these students won't end up in the games industry anyway.

CK: Traditionally, we take good graduates from good universities – we don't mind so much what the courses are. The best people are hobby coders who haven't necessarily studied computing. The same goes for a lot of artists, but we don't have a lot to work from because there aren't many of them.

That means you're doing training in-house.

CK: Yeah, you accept that. Even the perfect programmer still has to learn your way of working and that takes time – six months to a year, and two or three years to know instinctively how it works.

NB: We always bring every new software graduate through our shared technology group, and they're very well versed in getting people up to speed in six months to a year.

CK: A lot of programmers don't really know what they want to do when they start anyway – some like the idea of AI, or graphics, but change their minds, so you need to be flexible and give them a range of games to work on.

NB: And if you're not flexible, you'll get that churn of people leaving.

DA: It's really useful to have a set of people working that have experience in a number of areas so if you lose someone you haven't lost the company all the specialised knowledge that person held. **Ooh, there are so many challenges as programmers. It's amazing we get any games out.**

CK: The biggest challenge is probably change, but we're used to managing it. Every year new graphics cards come out, every five years there is a new generation of consoles. That's the one constant thing in games – change.

After all the doom-laden initial fears about the pressures of producing





games for the new generation of consoles, how are you feeling now you're a few cycles into it?

DA: We're all doomed! To be honest, and trying not to sound like an old fuddy-duddy seen-it-all-before, you can almost cut and paste the conversations we had five years ago. So I cease to be alarmed about it, even if the programmers or artists are saying they have no idea how they're going to do it. We've done it enough times to know we'll get over it.

NB: I can remember when we were taking *Kameo* from Xbox to 360 we were having this very usual conversation with our art guys about how the hell we were going to create the level of detail that we needed. And then we started to look at this new tool called ZBrush and all of a sudden, in the space of just two or three weeks, workflow had got back up to how it was in the previous generation.

CK: There's always a familiarisation process when new tech comes out where you ask what you can do. With new tech you often don't have the new tools, so you're doing things by brute force initially, but it becomes a lot easier as time goes on. But the next generation can also make the job a bit easier – you've got a lot more power so some programmers' jobs are easier because they can be a bit sloppier. For artists it's probably two and half to three times more effort to create the level of detail we want for this generation compared to the last. The design and coding teams are similar in size to last gen.

NB: One of the biggest challenges we've found is scaling up production and taking a performance hit in some of the technology to make the production process easier.

CK: But we saw that with the last generation, **the first PS2 games that came out were using something like only 20 per cent of its power. It took five years for us to get the best out of it, and we'll see that again with this generation.**



The first step is to just get stuff running, then you get it running fast enough and then apply the bells and whistles.

DA: What percentage do you think you're at with PS3 and 360, then?

CK: I'd say similar – about 30 per cent.

NB: I'd say from the 360 point of view and looking at what *Viva Piñata* did and what we're doing now, we're probably 50 per cent, and some of our R&D guys' blue-sky tech is frankly amazing. Five years ago it was completely offline and now it's running at 30 frames a second.

TB: How do you think that affects content?

NB: Sometimes it does steer content, but you're in dangerous territory if you always let it do that.

TB: Does this technology allow new and more interesting content?

CK: Absolutely it does. But also, because the development costs are higher, the risks are higher. So it enables from a tech point of view but disables from a cost and risk one.

TB: But don't you then just end up with prettier games?

CK: That was Nintendo's point, wasn't it, that it was going to do something completely different and concentrate on gameplay. It's going to be interesting to see what happens – **are people that buy Nintendo now going to be satisfied with that or are they going to be pulled into this lovely flashy world of PS3 and 360?**

NB: When you ask whether technology will take games in new directions, some of the things I've seen that people at Microsoft and Sony are playing with, things like realtime fluid dynamics, you can work new gameplay elements into. Everything from little tiny casual – not going to use that word! – little five-minute time-waster games all the way up to the big firstperson shooters.

TB: How does a generation step affect something like *Buzz*?

DA: It's funny, when it comes to the kind of games we make. Early on we made the mistake of saying that the graphics aren't important. And they're really not, but then **we roll up with Sony and present them with our PS3 game and they compare it with the likes of *LittleBigPlanet*, saying: "This is what PS3 games look like." And we say that we don't think it's that important, and Sony says: "Yeah, we think it is.** So however important you think graphics are, we're telling you." Somebody that's bought a PS3 is looking for something that looks like a PS3 game, so we've had to go back and bring a social game up to that standard.

What about the impact of how connected the new generation of consoles is, with user-generated content and so on?

CK: Yeah, there are some really exciting things – with user-generated content, people are going to come up with things that we'd never have thought about, or never had the time to do. We have way more ideas than we have time to put together. We're 280 people now and we've got way more ideas than we can possibly deal with.

DA: I always found the problem with online is that it commercially represented enough of the market on console, but now it's something like 60 per cent. So for the first time it's worth spending time on online features.

CK: But often the marketing guys want that, so we're driven by back-of-the-box points. **You do these wonderful presentations to publishers and the sales guy asks how many guns the game has. All this creativity and design and it comes down to that!**

NB: One thing we found when we put together downloadable content for our launch titles was that though it's expensive to create, it fits in with a large studio because you will have a number of embryonic projects going but still have a few people floating around to work on it. And when you put DLC out it'll give you a sales spike. Don't ask me why. So it works well as marketing.
CK: It shows the game is being supported, and says to people that lots of others are playing it.
NB: And you'll see that people buy the game and as soon as they load it in they'll download the new content, even before they've played it!
DA: They want everything and they want it all now! If you take *Buzz*, we wanted to do a *Buzz* 'game of the year' to release at Christmas, like the quizzes in the paper. But the problem is that by the time you work your way backwards, you're having to write the questions in February, and July's the cut-off date. So DLC will help *Buzz* be a little more up to date.
CK: There are some really exciting opportunities out there. Some people will take them, others won't. For an independent developer like us it's pretty exciting. There are lots of routes for us to get additional content – minigames, casual games, call it what you want.

Is it putting more pressure on you, though? User-generated content requires all sorts of extra testing to make watertight something that millions of people will try to break – as well as making sure the network infrastructure can take it all.
DA: That's one area, but there's also what YouTube is going through right now, which is asking who's responsible for the content that's being put on to it. Do you moderate content before it goes on to the system? Is reactive moderation OK? There's all sorts of legal stuff away from the game itself.
NB: That's a question I remember being asked of the XNA guys when they put forward Game Studio Express – **what happens when somebody starts doing social commentary games? Games with a political twist? On YouTube, people just say whatever they like. It's going to happen in games as well.** Is Microsoft responsible then?
TB: Also, people are doing copycat games – that's the way we all learned; you make your own version of *Jetpac*. So on XNA, people are going to be making versions of things, and who owns the rights to that? Lionhead had a problem with *The Movies* in that everyone was just remaking films, like Star Wars with Lego men. And they had to take them all down. It was something like 80 per cent of the content, because the studios were saying it was too close to their storylines.



Rare's *Jetpac: Refuelled* (left) and *Kameo: Elements Of Power* (right) show two sides of modern videogame development – one an experimental project created by only a handful of staff, the other a convoluted development cycle that spanned three consoles

Microsoft's Chris Satchell said yesterday that the user-generated content movement is an inevitability – it's going to happen, like it or not, so it's the current legal and institutional structures that have got to change.
TB: I think so. We did some work with teenagers recently about media and their perceptions of it. Our grandparents saw media as the man on the BBC telling them the news and how life was. Our generation saw guys in the Falklands with cameras and you got to see a bit more and felt more involved. Teenagers today see media as a big ball of clay they can mould. Media doesn't tell them what to do, they tell it. So I think Chris Satchell's right. And as producers we have to work out how to frame it.
CK: The future is going to happen – it depends on whether you want to be part of it.
TB: You only need to look at the music industry to see what happens if you try to stop it.
NB: Or control it – that's probably worse than stopping it. Satchell also said that he thought that games were the best piece of media able to take advantage of this movement, probably because of what you said, Chris – that they're this big conglomeration of all forms of media.
CK: I think the thing with videogames is that they're a fairly compact form of digital media, and that's our strength – but it means that we can be copied easily, too. But we need to take advantage of our amazing ability to send things and share in a positive way, rather than moaning about it and being negative.



Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Hotel Dusk: Room 215



The story and imaginative visuals are enough to push you on through the less-than-stellar mechanics, although typically it has us wondering what a sequel will offer.
DS, NINTENDO

Tetris DS



A rediscovery of its online features has begun yet another time-guzzling, brick-dropping obsession that's delivering some gloating highs and hand-cramping lows.
DS, NINTENDO

Zelda: The Wind Waker



Recent playthroughs of a few *Zelda* titles have shown that *The Wind Waker* more than stands up among them as beautiful looking and a refreshingly peaceful game.
GAMECUBE, NINTENDO

Is the price right?
How downloadable games present new questions



Warhawk's longevity – and therefore value – is less to do with the relative paucity of its level count than their design and the balancing of its multiplayer dynamics

Warhawk, to download, will cost £20. To buy a boxed copy (including a Bluetooth headset), it will cost £40. As we've noted in this month's review, Sony's decision to make a game of *Warhawk*'s importance a downloadable one is another indication that physical media is slowly on its way out. And, as a purely multiplayer game offering a mere five levels, a £20 pricepoint certainly feels more attractive.

This month we've also looked at *Space Giraffe*, which costs just £5 to download. As a highly specialised abstract shooter it may not chime with everyone, but at £5, who could feel ripped off? On the other hand, last month we said that it appeared *Calling All Cars* was using its low pricepoint (£5) as justification for a lack of content.

The newly extended range of game prices clearly makes it more difficult to review them on the basis of whether or not they're worth buying. If the flawed *BioShock* were to be released for £5, would it be tempting to call it a much better package? If *Shadowrun* was a cheaper downloadable game in the *Warhawk* mould, might it have scored a little higher? If a PS3 owner cannot, for whatever reason, download *Warhawk*, should they be put off from buying it in a shop?

For many people, physical media is important. It can provide a greater sense of ownership; the ritual of going to the shop or waiting for the thud of the package on the hallway floor can be a special part of the process of encountering a game for the first time, and opening the box and placing the disc in the console tray can be important for every session thereafter. But what universal value these things might have is impossible to discern.

It's unlikely, though, that the use of physical media is going to die just yet, not least because more developers are beginning to noises about the limited capacity of DVDs; the heaving swathes of data required by many modern games are in many cases impractical in the world of digital distribution.

But for all the smaller games, there's less and less commercial reason to restrict sales to shops. And though that might make our job more difficult, it is certain to make the gaming landscape more varied, and better value, than ever.



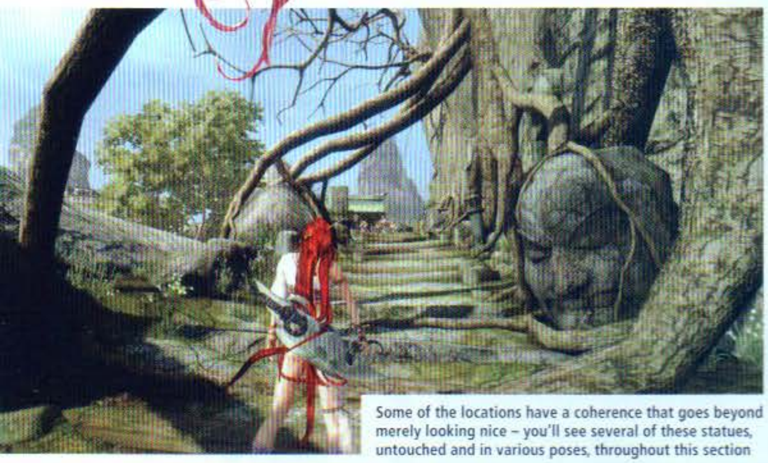
Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



HEAVENLY SWORD

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 14 PUBLISHER: SCEE
DEVELOPER: NINJA THEORY PREVIOUSLY IN: E164





Some of the locations have a coherence that goes beyond merely looking nice – you'll see several of these statues, untouched and in various poses, throughout this section





The Heavenly Sword changes appearance depending on your stance: in long range, two sections are connected by chains; in power stance, those two blades form one big one



Heavenly Sword is a game that has had to carry the burden of becoming a standard-bearer for PlayStation 3, and as its host platform's topsy-turvy ride has continued, its importance has increased. It's not good enough to simply be a good game and a flagship title: with the likes of *Killzone 2*, *LittleBigPlanet* and *MGS4* some time away, it has to be proof of the console's capabilities and, above all else, a system seller.

The game is certainly stunning from a visual standpoint, with some breathtakingly realised levels throughout, but it is its roster of characters, which surpass those of the likes of *Gears Of War*, that really push at boundaries. At the same time, however, some design decisions simply jar – Nariko's famous hair, for example, is incongruously unreal next to her perfectly modelled face. It may have been a major design decision, but it's not justified by the implementation, which at times simply looks weird. However, many of the other characters – particularly Nariko's father and King Bohan – simply set new standards in gaming.

Nor is the narrative merely dressing. It's a good story, and the voice-acting throughout is excellent. Ninja Theory has created some bizarre and grotesque enemies, and Nariko offers up some effective verbal comebacks during boss encounters. The dialogue is neither profound nor particularly deep, but it's easy to see its tongue-in-cheek moments becoming cult favourites (although one more 'weak point for massive damage' reference may just finish us off).

As for the meat of the game, the combat system works well, and in some respects is superior to its obvious inspirations, thanks primarily to the ability to switch easily between ranged, speedy and heavy stances, which all involve predictably different techniques and effects on your enemies. Thanks to a fluid incorporation of blocking, dodges and counters, the game is, at times, a cracking action extravaganza.

However, even on 'Hell Mode' (unlocked after beating the game on normal difficulty) the enemies provide little sustained challenge, and mastering the basics will see you waltz through their ranks with ease. It's one respect in which the system is markedly inferior to the likes of *Ninja Gaiden*, although *Heavenly Sword*'s focus on spectacle over challenge should be emphasised. But when a game can be easily completed on its hardest setting without using a major slice of the moves available – and there is never any real need to use the environment – then there is obviously a touch of the formulaic about its challenge.

That aside, the real Achilles heel of *Heavenly Sword* is its focus on distance attacks, which take up a significant portion of the game. During these sequences you have to fire arrows at oncoming enemies, or move away from enemies and fire arrows at



Nariko is a distinctive lead, and is voiced superbly, but the staggering facial detail is at odds with the large, lank virtual locks that sully the otherwise brilliantly realised cutscenes



Some of the real strengths of *Heavenly Sword* are boss encounters, which are introduced with a neat 'cutaway' effect while the game is ongoing. But despite the visual imagination, none of them puts up a hefty challenge



them, at which point you can take control of the projectile and guide it on its way and even through flames in moments reminiscent of Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves. It's a novel concept the first time you do it, but tiresome the 20th, and just a bit tedious the 100th. There is so much repetition of this basic idea – over clichés such as a slow-moving cable car – that it almost sours the rest of the experience.

That it doesn't is testament to the quality in some of *Heavenly Sword*'s design touches that let you exult in Nariko's power and grace. There's a section in one of the final levels, after a series of tough fights, for example, when you move on to a picturesque bridge and the camera takes a



> A heaving crowd of enemies pours out towards you, and you barrel into them, scattering bodies to all sides. It is a sensational-looking encounter

side-on perspective. A heaving crowd of weak enemies pours out towards you, and you barrel into them, scattering bodies to all sides. It is a sensational-looking encounter, and it's hugely gratifying to play.

These smaller moments, in fact, outshine some of the more ambitious sections, such as the large battle scenes in which Nariko has to face down an entire army. Unfortunately, these episodes have been implemented poorly: over three levels involving mass-scale tear-ups you'll spend perhaps ten minutes on foot but more like 20 minutes with a cannon. And the cannon-based battles, which work just like the arrow-shooting sections, are drawn-out – not because of any great difficulty, but because of the great amount of repetition involved in taking down identical catapults while an abstract energy bar or (even worse) a timer counts down, neither of which have any effect on your surroundings or succeed in communicating a sense of urgency. But the battlefield is at least pleasing to look at, and the final boss shows an eye for the climactic moment that goes beyond most games, providing a satisfying denouement.

But those moments are rare, and the exception rather than the rule. If *Heavenly Sword* is a great spectacle, in more than a few respects it also falls somewhat short of the quality of the games whose templates it has studied – plus, it's all over all too quickly.

It's worth experiencing for the artistry in its visual flair, excellent cutscenes and one or two inspired directorial moments, but as a game? The previous-generation *God Of War* series has the definite edge. **[6]**







Some of the panoramic backdrops are beautifully done, and the game is fond of zooming out and around Nariko for appropriately dramatic viewpoints during lulls



A handful of puzzles appear throughout, but unfortunately they amount to little more than either pressing the X button to pull a lever or throwing plates at gongs – sometimes both

At sixes and sevens



The Sixaxis' tilt controls are incorporated, but not with a grace to match the visuals. A key move of Nariko's, the mid-air recovery, is synched to jerking the pad upwards – which sounds workable, but in pitched battles becomes irritating. The 'aftertouch' controls for arrows and cannon balls also utilise the tilting mechanism, essential for pinpoint accuracy on catapults and distant archers, and it's fine in those more measured situations. But when you've picked up an object in battle and are trying to throw it with aftertouch at nearby foes it proves fiddly and frustrating. Ultimately, the implementations work respectably but not intuitively – which arguably misses the whole point of motion-sensing in the first place.



BIOSHOCK

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC PRICE: £45 (360), £35 (PC)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: TAKE 2
DEVELOPER: IRRATIONAL PREVIOUSLY IN: E164







The scale of the earlier sections, and the propaganda and adverts that decorate your surroundings, make the world seem wholly authentic



Several of the citizens of Rapture have tragic stories that you'll happen upon on your travels, and some unlucky souls have particularly messy endings. Others just need a whack

B*ioShock* is one of the experiences of the year, but certainly not unreservedly. It's at once a joy and a disappointment, achingly ambitious and cravenly conservative, and ultimately a complete triumph in one sense and a nagging failure in several others.

It begins in exceptional fashion: you're in a plane, and then you're in the middle of the Atlantic surrounded by pieces of a crashed plane. After you've found your way to a nearby lighthouse, entered a bathysphere (the ubiquitous method of transport in *BioShock*) and are descending to an as-yet-unknown place, a combination of rhetoric, neon and the fascination of the unfamiliar combine for something truly jaw-dropping.

The first hour of *BioShock* is much like this: a combination of game design and cinematic flair that is intoxicating. You'll creep up behind hunched splicers as they mutter over corpses, overhear arguments, and find diaries that hint at a grander narrative. You'll find and use a plasmid, and be introduced to the Big Daddies and Little Sisters. The scope of the production, and indeed of Rapture, seems limitless.

In fact, if *BioShock* were to be reviewed based on its first two hours alone, it would be game of the year material. It has several moments that deserve high praise after this, particularly a prolonged encounter with a crazed artist, but these are unfortunately surrounded by moments of mediocrity. *BioShock*'s problem is that it simply can't maintain a consistent standard outside of its exceptional opening and occasional highpoints, as in between it resorts to the hoariest game conventions to pad things out. The suspicion that this is an uninspired FPS with inspired presentation takes root, and is rarely contradicted.

> BioShock's problem is that it simply can't maintain a consistent standard outside of its exceptional opening and occasional highpoints

Though the environments are noticeably distinct, it's perhaps the lack of variety within them that is most noticeable. The people who once lived there were apparently of only five different types: by the end you'll know the attack patterns inside out and dismiss them without either challenge or care. The various security devices are dealt with in exactly the same way from first to last. Even the Big Daddies prove surprisingly easy to dispatch, with a simple one-two punch of plasmid and grenade launcher seeing them fall after four or five repetitions. *Doom* had more enemy variety than this. Most painfully, the Little Sisters and Big Daddies don't interact with the world in any believable way. There are scripted encounters with splicers that you'll witness, and certain animations which can be touching, but if, for example, you kill a Big Daddy then leave the Little Sister next to her dead protector, surrounded by splicers who'll do anything for the Adam she holds, she won't be touched. In fact, the movement routine of splicers will merrily take them through her position, scraping their weapons on the floor and not even looking. The promise of interacting with a grand world in which you're surrounded by creatures with their own agendas is hollow.

In fact, *BioShock* offers little that's new in any area outside of its setting, and the much-vaunted Little Sister dilemma is an unmitigated failure. Games cannot offer moral choices, but they can create a moral context for your in-game actions. *BioShock* doesn't, primarily because it quickly becomes clear that there is a 'right' option to choose and what that option is – but also because, it



The Little Sisters collect Adam from corpses with a distinctive syringe and some disturbing sound effects, but it's a real pity that they all use the same character model







you play the game through twice, the effects of your actions are invisible, and even in the one location where they should be obvious have had no visual impact. Worst of all, the immediate result of your choice turns out to be a 'green blood moment'.

Against these disappointments, *BioShock*'s story is accomplished and Rapture is a remarkable world to move about in. There are contradictions – why would the currency of Rapture, founded by Andrew Ryan as a self-sufficient enclave free from the influence of 'the man in Washington', be the dollar? – but the atmosphere of encroaching water, cramped corridors and destroyed beauty is such that these irritants are subsumed. Part of this atmosphere derives from the voice-acting, which is of a remarkably high standard throughout, almost without exception, and raises the bar for future games. Unfortunately, *BioShock* goes downhill very badly after a key moment in the plot, and it's painful because the specific narrative moment leads you to believe that Irrational was aware of the nature of the experience it was creating, and had pulled one of gaming's greatest masterstrokes. But the remainder of the game acts in exactly the same way as what has gone before, and that epiphanic moment ends up parodying *BioShock* itself.

That would be an unkind note to end on, because *BioShock* offers a lot of quality beyond the problems that exist within it. But it's a game of 'if only'. If only the mechanics matched the atmosphere. If only Rapture was a less linear world to move through. If only *BioShock* was the *wholly* brilliant experience you know, from your moments within it, it could have been. **[8]**

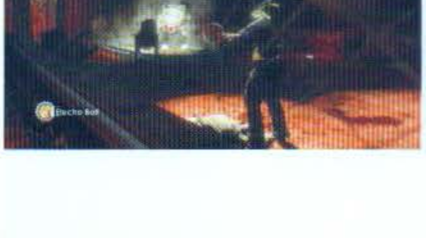


Set enemies on fire, and some will run around desperately looking for water, while others, such as this one, will crawl on the ceiling in circles until they drop











Going near Little Sisters angers Big Daddies – though they won't attack unless you do. They moan like whales, and are a melancholy, unsettling presence in the world of Rapture

Who is John Galt?



Andrew Ryan, the creator of Rapture, is a beguiling creation himself. A clipped accent, pencil moustache and pinstripe suit around the personality of a parallel dimension's Howard Hughes, his is the first human voice you'll hear in the game, and a recurring punctuation throughout your time in his world. The initial attraction may be that he's a brilliant theorist, combining influences from Orwell to Ayn Rand (note the initials) that have coalesced into the world you're experiencing. Most interestingly, by the time of your meeting there are some subtle indications that he has performed a volte-face and accepted the Sanction of the Victim, a concept from Rand's Atlas Shrugged whereby the good accept that they must suffer for the sake of promoting principles, in this case an extremely specific one. Is that inconsistent with his character? Is it you who has caused this change? Are we reading too much into it? It's a measure of *BioShock* that it can present such complex psychological quandaries – but in that context, and with the wonderful voice-acting, the terrible lip-synching is unforgivable.



WARHAWK

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £20 (ONLINE), £40 (RETAIL)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (ONLINE), TBA (RETAIL) PUBLISHER: SCEE
DEVELOPER: INCOG INC PREVIOUSLY IN: E168







The levels are open and pretty spacious, even considering the speed at which you're travelling – but soar too high and you stall; leave the combat zone entirely and you start to take damage

If for no other reason, PS3-exclusive vehicular shooter *Warhawk* is an important release simply for the fact that it tosses yet another handful of dirt on to the coffin of physical media. Alongside *Tekken 5: Dark Resurrection*, *Warhawk* is one of a vanguard of big-name titles advancing on PlayStation Network, proving that digital delivery isn't just restricted to low-budget arcade-style titles. That said, the fact that *Warhawk* is a multiplayer-only game is acknowledged by a low pricepoint, and even the more expensive version available at retail comes with a Bluetooth headset in compensation. So, you can perhaps forgive the game for being a little slight: although releasing with just five levels might seem to strain your generosity, this is a title of such chaotic and addictive energy that it easily recommends itself as a purchase on a system starved of similar games.

Dropped straight into the action, however, *Warhawk* is initially a little overwhelming. The Sixaxis struggles to keep up with the sheer number of control configurations required for the game's various vehicles – when flying you frequently find your fingers at maximum capacity, a finger over each trigger, each shoulder button and both analogue sticks, all while trying to fiddle with the D-pad. Well, at least you can alter your tilt sensitivity. One major confusion (though it is one that a few hours of play overcomes) is that your Warhawk's two modes of flight, either as a helicopter or plane, utilise completely divergent control



The geography of the landscape has been designed to encourage ambitious aeronautical stunts. The placement of this item practically demands a loop-the-loop around the arch

schemes. When in helicopter mode, your ship hovers, its altitude controlled by the triggers, and the analogue stick controlling movement in that plane. Switch modes, and your craft automatically moves forward, with throttle and air brakes now controlled by the triggers, and the left analogue stick determining pitch and yaw.

between equally skilled pilots, weaving through the landscape, looping, diving and spinning in order to gain the upper hand. However, swooping around isn't a foolproof way to shake off a missile lock, and although there are defensive measures players can take, such as deploying chaff or activating a stealth device, they must choose between

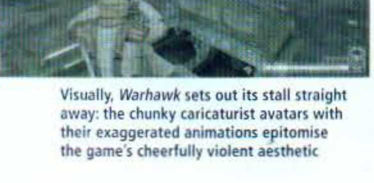
> It tosses yet another handful of dirt on to the coffin of physical media, proving digital delivery isn't just restricted to low-budget arcade titles

It's baffling at first, but once you adapt to the shock of such continual and sudden changes, flight becomes a joy – fluid and responsive – as thrilling a representation of three-dimensional freedom as we've seen in a game. The right analogue rolls the craft into beautiful pirouettes, and allows evasive acrobatics that look and feel effortless.

Dogfights here can be protracted affairs

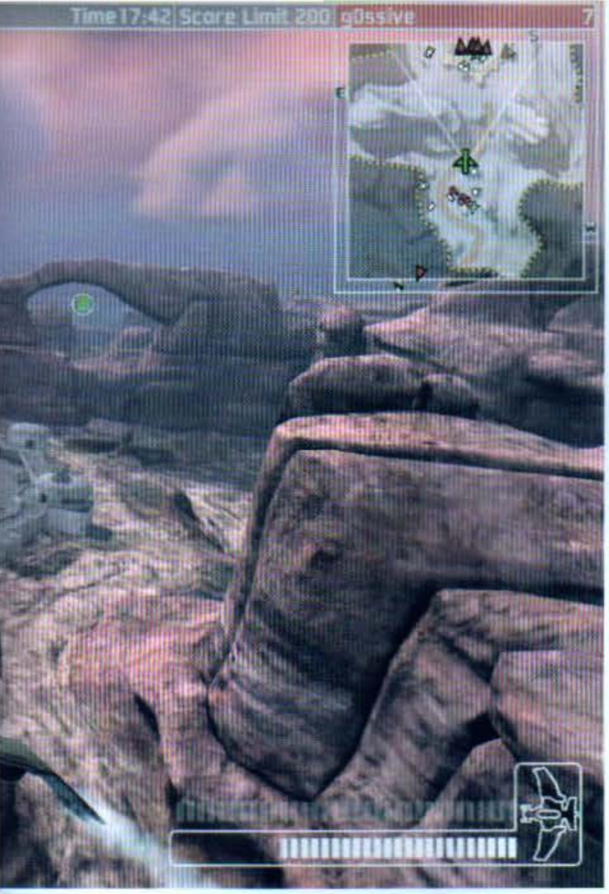
having these equipped and their primary weapon. Since it is rare that a foe will remain in your firing line long enough for you to take it down with your standard machine gun, the decision of what to equip in that primary slot and when makes combat more subtle and skilful than is first apparent.

Similar consideration has been given to the balance between available weapons: the default missiles take only a few moments to lock on to their target, during which time you must keep your quarry in the reticule – however, their ease of use is a trade-off with their weakness in comparison to other weaponry and their short-lived interest in pursuing their target. Collectible weaponry is dotted about the level in the form of brightly coloured icons – the most powerful items often placed in locations which require careful manoeuvring among the scenery or leave your craft exposed. The more powerful missiles are less plentiful in number and take a considerable time to lock on (although their targeting reticule is more



Visually, *Warhawk* sets out its stall straight away: the chunky caricaturist avatars with their exaggerated animations epitomise the game's cheerfully violent aesthetic











Warhawk's levels really are something to behold. They're decently sized, too, and never suffer under the number of vehicles onscreen at any one time. More will be made available for download after release, among other extras

generously sized), but can take out an aircraft with a single strike.

Although the focus of the game naturally gravitates towards flight, the developer has been careful to make ground combat a significant power. Surface and aerial dominance are equalised by the SAM turrets, the missiles from which will doggedly pursue an aircraft, seeking routes around the scenery until they catch their target. The liberal smattering of rocket launchers means that, even on foot, a player can be a real threat to those in the sky. By contrast, Warhawks are unable to target ground vehicles or individual troops, and with the exception of a rather imprecise cluster bomb, they remain largely restricted to air-to-air combat.

Nonetheless there is a sense that, while those on foot aren't without defence, ground movement is simply inefficient. The levels are built for aircraft first and foremost, and sometimes it seems that little thought has been given to how this might maroon those without transport. The tropically themed Archipelago, for example, places the action on and around a number of stacks rising dramatically from the ocean. While this makes for delightful dogfights, threading in between the pillars of rock, skimming the waves and slipping through sea caves, movement by foot is considerably stunted. In a fully populated game, the Warhawks nearest to spawn points are rapidly claimed and you can find yourself occasionally having to wait for another to spawn before you can get anywhere near the combat zone. Equally, you can find that the limited number of spawn points become overcrowded – particularly in straight deathmatch games, when you may expend a fair few lives just trying to get to an aircraft.

Even for its moments of disorder, the game never becomes unappealing – you just accept it as part and parcel of a game that revels in mayhem. Although *Warhawk* has clearly been thoughtfully designed for the most part, it is not a game that ever really reaches for strategic nuance. Even in the gametypes which you might think would enforce more structure, such as those that involve zone capture, the action tends to be a little more frantic, imprecise and disparate than in comparable games such as *Battlefield*. Although slightly shallow as a result, *Warhawk's* manic pace makes for an instantly gratifying experience, and its brilliantly implemented notion of flight and considered balance among combat options more than compensate for the slenderness of its offering. **[8]**

Special delivery



Warhawk's levels are dotted with pick-ups – and while your aircraft's default weapons are capable enough, restocking them or replacing them with more powerful tools is essential. Among the items on offer are a stealth device that makes you impossible to target, a lightning gun which is weak but needs no aiming, a cluster bomb, and a camera-guided rocket. Although you'd be lucky to fly the latter into opposing aircraft, it's a useful means of taking out a missile emplacement or tank from a safe distance. Needless to say, they aren't easy to find.

The SAM launchers are a force to be reckoned with – their missiles will relentlessly pursue a fleeing craft, even when it tries to lose them among Archipelago's rocky stacks







It's a little too easy to exploit the limited number of spawn points – ground combat tends to gravitate towards it – and in a tank you are pretty much unassailable to freshly spawned, under-equipped soldiers



MEDAL OF HONOR: AIRBORNE

FORMAT: PC (VERSION TESTED), 360, PS3 PRICE: £30 (PC), £40 (360, PS3)
RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 7 (PC, 360), OCTOBER 5 (PS3)
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E176







Despite extensive use of motion-capture and expensive-sounding voice acting, cutscenes fail to conjure up any sort of emotion that will linger in the memory





It's unfortunate that more often than not the only time a tried and tested series will push the envelope is when competition demands it. Praise be, then, for the military FPS games that are encroaching on *MOH*'s target audience from every angle, because with *Airborne* the franchise has attempted something a little different.

Paralleling the paratroopers it casts the player as, *Airborne* relies on a curious and initially worrying idea. It starts you off in the air above a level and lets you control your drift downwards, letting you land on not just any stretch of land but on any roof or through any hole within a fairly expansive dropzone. This shatters the linear structure *MOH* (not to mention far too many other FPS games) relied on in the past, and instead of trundling along rails you're slapped in the middle of a warzone with countless clusters and pockets of enemies and a few dozen more US troops. It's funny how history repeats itself, because this is an experiment that proves to be a success.

Enemies spawn and choose cover in accordance to the random positioning of the allies who drop with you, where you choose to land yourself, and where you go from there, so levels lose the false drama of scripted sequences but take on something much more satisfying. Everything that happens in *Airborne*'s dropzones, from shameful deaths to GI Joe heroics, feels like it's because of you, and it usually it is. Once you've become comfortable with your new-found freedom you'll even unconsciously bring about the exact pacing you feel like dealing with. *Airborne* admirably accommodates both those players who want to hurl themselves into the jaws of death and the ones who want to get cosy behind some cover with a warm sniper rifle.

While it wouldn't have been asking too much for EA to have based the entire game around a well-fleshed-out version of this mechanic, it perhaps would have been optimistic. *Airborne*'s levels have a cartwheel shape, with straight spokes coming off that central, circular dropzone. Once you've fought your way to the edge of the zone to get to one of your objectives the game becomes a lot more familiar, and the freeform level design is swapped out for something more straight and sober.

Airborne does straightforward action as well as any *MOH* game has in the past, but it's unquestionably the dropzones you'll look forward to floating back down towards, and their hub-like positioning is prudent. There's replay value in those wide-open arenas, and it's expanded with a selection of unlockables earned via achievements.

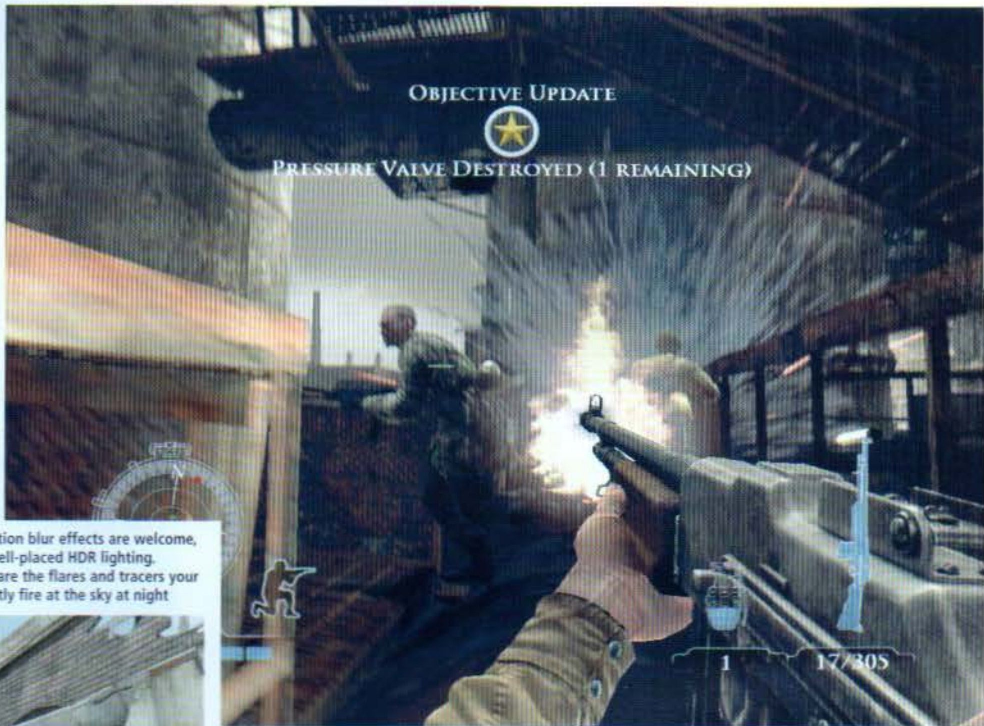
Airborne accommodates the players who want to hurl themselves into the jaws of death and those who want to get cosy with a sniper rifle

As you storm through the game you'll get new weapons you can take with you on returns to previous maps, and getting enough kills with any gun or grenade lets you take it through three levels of upgrades. The growth of your arsenal makes going back to get more stars on a given level tempting, then maxing out all the guns sounds fun, and then you'll find yourself so close to a medal you may as well go back into the fray just one more time.

Airborne's Skill Drops provide less of a draw but still go some way to making a level interesting the second or third time around. These are five locations on each







Effective motion blur effects are welcome, as is some well-placed HDR lighting. Prettier still are the flares and tracers your foes constantly fire at the sky at night



map which make for excellent landing sites, such as inside a ruined water tower or beside the rear entrance of an enemy foxhole. They're entertainingly tricky to achieve, but they lack the perfectionist lure because it takes the death of your character for every chance you want to tick one off your list.

Ultimately it's the smoothness of the production coupled with the lack of restraints that make it all engaging. For a game based on shock troops, there aren't as many surprises as you'd hope for, but in *Airborne* EA has produced another semi-smart, semi-exciting and rock solid experience. **[7]**



You'll occasionally stumble across an enemy spawn point when you avoid whatever mysterious trigger it is the game uses to move them away from you. This is more than made up for by the unexpected arrival of reinforcements from your own side, who majestically drift down from the skies





While *Airborne* entertains players with a lust for sniping (above), stealth is a no-go area, since the best method of avoiding enemies' eagle-like vision is through prayer

Clipping wings



Airborne's Weapon Experience system has a potent range of rewards. With the devastating new Gammon grenades at full power you become a walking artillery piece, and an upgraded shotgun or SMG makes clearing houses on the earlier levels feel as dangerous as giggling your way around Laser Quest. Worst (and, of course, best) of all is the BAR, *Airborne*'s machine gun, which eventually has you scything through swathes of enemies. There's an occasional and unpleasant feeling that you're playing a multiplayer game against easy bots, but then it might just be worth it for the excuse to use your pistol and the more pleasurable bolt-action rifles long after they've become outmoded.





STUNTMAN: IGNITION

FORMAT: 360, PS2, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £45 (360), £35 (PS2), £50 (PS3) RELEASE: OUT NOW (360, PS2), SEPTEMBER (PS3) PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: PARADIGM PREVIOUSLY IN: E175

Stunted growth



While the multiplayer modes are a little limp, *Ignition* does supplement its singleplayer campaign with some decent diversions. The Constructor allows you to build your own stunt courses using a simple and accessible interface. There are two modes – a freestyle arena and a challenge mode, vaguely reminiscent of The Incredible Machine, whereby you are given a set number of items with which to construct a course around preset stunt markers.

Showbiz is a tough racket. If there is one universal truth about success in Hollywood, it's that it requires relentless, gruelling perseverance in the face of completely unreasonable demands, insufferable conditions and unfavourable odds. So it is with *Stuntman: Ignition*, a game that puts you in the driver's seat for a series of punishing cinematic challenges which, unfortunately, devolve into a relentless series of restarts.

The courses play like a point-to-point rally race, your route through the film set marked out by green arrows – except, rather than the brusque warnings of upcoming turns with which players of *Dirt* will be familiar, *Ignition*'s demands are somewhat more elaborate: drive over the police cars in a monster truck; leap over the lava flow; crash through the water tower; smash the flatbed truck carrying the SCUD missile launcher off the road.

There's no doubt it's an attractive concept: stringing together a series of prescribed pyrotechnics with perfect timing to create a precise and fluid action set-piece. Paradigm has gone to some lengths to add flesh to the premise by building an engaging world around this core. The films and their directors are charming parodies, and their description through voiceover adds a well-considered level of texture, without beleaguering what is in essence a driving game with unnecessary narrative.



While an 'easy' mode allows you to fail twice the number of stunts, your score is halved – and it's by score, rather than completion of courses, that you progress through the career mode

Ignition's gameplay, however, never quite delivers on its promise and presentational polish. The courses rarely coalesce into something cinematic – their potential jeopardised by an unreasonable and unforgiving scoring system. It is not simply that it is tricky, though, since games of such unerring severity are frequently enjoyable – but not when the real challenge is to overcome the imperfections of the design.

Stunt markers are used to indicate the next prescribed event on the course ahead, but they frequently appear too late for your reactions to matter. The width and appearance of the courses imply some degree of freedom, but this is entirely misleading; in order to stand a chance of executing each stunt, you must stick to a strict and initially unknowable racing line. Miss a mere handful stunts and you have to start again – then again and again.



Completion of a course doesn't necessarily result in something that would work on film – disappointingly, the replays aren't edited in a particularly cinematic fashion

Ignition has no intention for the courses to be even remotely possible on your first attempt – and this might be perfectly acceptable were the player's failure always his own, rather than the result of the game's common inability to read player behaviour correctly. All too often you're baffled as to how your slick 180° spin failed to satisfy the marking criteria, only to pass on the next attempt with a clunking three-point turn.

Such finnicky and erratic scoring rarely gives the game a chance to flow in a way that does justice to the compelling premise of creating cinema. *Stuntman* has great potential, but it is locked behind a draconian structure that fundamentally misunderstands what makes the game attractive, and is often plain aggravating to boot. **[6]**



The driving model is imprecise, with unnervingly buoyant physics. Oddly, despite the difficulty, flipping your car over entirely doesn't trigger a fail





One of the better graphical effects is the accelerating of the screen around your craft. While it's nothing new to have 'go faster' lines, the blurring and focus suit the bright environments particularly well – and hide a few flaws





FATAL INERTIA

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 PRICE: £50
RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 14 PUBLISHER: KOEI
DEVELOPER: KOEI CANADA PREVIOUSLY IN: E164

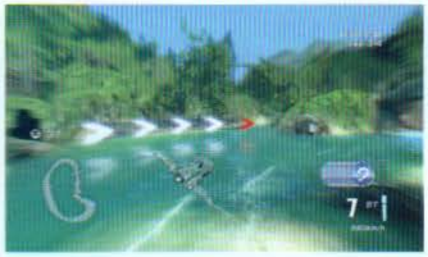
Fatal Inertia may seem like a marriage made in heaven: the *Wipeout* aesthetic applied to the bouncy combat of *Mario Kart*. Its futuristic cars slip-slide around its often cavernous courses in a manner that will irritate purist devotees of the former, and attack each other with ingenious weapons that will delight fans of the latter. But does the fusion work as more than just a concept, or is it some kind of floaty mess?

Ultimately, the answer is neither. *Fatal Inertia* promised so much in its early showings (which claimed to represent in-game footage), but has turned out as a decent but thoroughly predictable racer. The basic meat of the game is a career mode during which you can gain sponsors and earn money for upgrading your vehicle, while gradually working through the generous number of tracks on offer. The quantity comes at the expense of variation, however, as main themes and skins are re-used five or six times for different circuits – not a huge problem, but at the quicker paces misremembering the permutations of the specific circuit you're on can be common, and the tracks are frustratingly full of places where your craft can get stuck (while the camera goes hideously haywire) for long enough to effectively end your race chances, particularly on the higher difficulty levels.

The racing itself is not simply racing: there are several different modes that significantly alter tactics, from the simple combat race to 'Magnet Madness', where each racer has a supply of the game's most ubiquitous weapon (see 'Magnetise!'). Other features include a bungee-type rope that can attach two enemy craft together, a good old fashioned rocket, and a shield. Each of these also has two uses that significantly differ, allowing you to bludgeon your way through a crowd or simply zip around the side – the rocket, for example, can either give you a boost or can be attached to an enemy, where it'll boost them from the opposite direction to which it's attached. Yes, you can boost the player in front of you straight into a brick wall, and, yes, it's great fun.

But always offsetting these anarchic moments are the faults in track design, which can be confusing and badly signposted. In one sense this is a product of the open slant that allows you to choose between slightly different routes, but there's no excuse for outright confusion and the insistence on relatively small checkpoint gates which can turn your brilliant corner-cutting into a losing manoeuvre. Shaving off those few necessary metres only for MISSED CHECKPOINT to dominate your screen is old-school in a bad way.

Ultimately, *Fatal Inertia* simply doesn't offer enough to make you think it's either a rewrite of the genre or the refinement that defines it. It's a fun game, the weapons can be inspired when they connect in just the right way, and there should be plenty of life in it online, but its fusion of inspirations can just occasionally prove too haphazard. It's not going to end in a horrible divorce, then, but you'd be surprised if it lasted. **[6]**





There is a comprehensive set of skins for the vehicles, and buying upgrades also changes their appearance significantly. The most pleasing effect by far, though, is a simple red Knight Rider light bar

Magnetise!



The power-ups have been well thought out and can prove very satisfying when they hit an enemy craft's sweet spot. The most basic weapon is the Magnet, a small device that is fired and attaches to any section of a craft. It doesn't do a great deal, adding a little drag to the section to which it's attached and making steering a little tougher, and it can be removed easily with a quick boost. But it's designed to land on a craft as it hits a bend and disorient the driver for just that fraction of a second on a tight turn to send them into the corner, and when four or five of them have attached to a vehicle's wing they're deadly: the physics of the craft change completely and can often see you steer straight into walls, if not the ground itself.



The purple platforms are the game's power-up zones, and their placement is generous around most of the game's tracks – you'll very rarely be without some means of attacking foes







MOTOGP '07

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC PRICE: £45
RELEASE: AUGUST 24 PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: CLIMAX

Competent riding in *MotoGP '07* takes effort. Newcomers may find the experience frustrating – and the lifeless training mode won't help – but perseverance will eventually uncover a hugely rewarding experience

Bikes online



Live functionality, a winning part of the Climax *MotoGP* games since the franchise's earliest days, returns here in necessarily tweaked form. Alongside 16-player GP and Extreme races (which, dependent on the standard of opponents, can provide racing experiences of the highest calibre) there is the option to enter several tournaments and pink-slip events and thus gamble your ride online. But it's not just serious play – *MotoGP*'s lighter side shows up in more relaxed events such as Tag and Stunt modes, and their inclusion is certainly welcome.

The trouble with releasing a new version of a franchise each year is that you don't get a year to work on it. Once you factor in pre-production, QA, certification, duplication, distribution and all the other day-eating aspects of the game-making carrousel, you're often lucky if you're left with little more than six months of actual development time. And half a year is hardly the time to start reinventing the wheel.

This neatly explains the 'if it works, why fix it?' approach to systematic sequels, as well as giving some context for the obvious lack of major departures with regard to game mechanics in those titles. As far as *MotoGP '07* is concerned, it therefore justifies the reasons for the game's considerable similarities to *MotoGP '06*.

Sure, it's not identical. Most noticeable is the inclusion of the latest official rider and bike content of the current MotoGP season, of course, as well as the attempt at building atmosphere – something the series can lack – with a pleasing visual rendition of the typical pre-race hubbub on the grid (even if the sequences soon repeat).

On the track, other things appear improved. You may not notice the use of inverse kinematics to get the riders to convincingly grip their handlebars, or you might find it difficult to spot the graphical





In addition to the usual race modes, Challenges unlock progressively, but a general lack of window-dressing removes the incentive to do more than the bare minimum

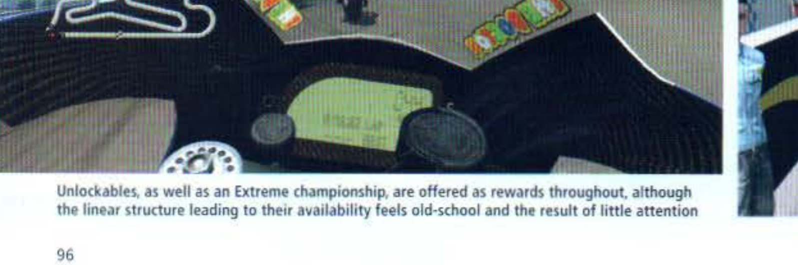
enhancements when doing 170mph, but better visual feedback in body animation and the way the bike's rear end wiggles under heavy braking or acceleration play their part in the handling's perceived realism.

The handling, of course, has always been the series' cornerstone, and here it returns in pristine condition, the delicate balance of the dynamic between independent front/rear braking, together with bodyweight shifting, offering uniquely rewarding moments. Nailing the perfect lap in *MotoGP* remains arguably a more gratifying experience than any car-based videogame ever manages.

Things are not always so convincing with regard to the actual racing, however. For the most part it's certainly accomplished, exciting and engrossing, but it's disappointing to find your AI opposition can still be the cause of frustrating accidents due to a seeming disregard for your position on the track, while slow corners continue to faze them.

Equally unfortunate is the game's Extreme mode, which again returns in a more restricted form than we'd prefer, though its inclusion does allow for blasts through the countryside of Tuscany and the Outback, to name two of the 17 examples (of which some are urban-based, naturally) – a welcome contrast to the understandably sober overtones of the game's main focus.

Overall, then, this emerges as a revised, marginally stronger example of the virtual motorbike racing we've come to expect from the franchise. But owners of *MotoGP '06* may want to skip a year. [7



Unlockables, as well as an Extreme championship, are offered as rewards throughout, although the linear structure leading to their availability feels old-school and the result of little attention







HEROES OF MANA

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 14 PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E175







An RPG veneer is added through items that are awarded at the end of each level which boost various stats and attributes of your characters. It seems a little empty, however

With no substantial link in either genre or characters to *Secret Of Mana* – barring the ubiquitous rabites – *Heroes Of Mana* will be a disappointment to anyone with rose-tinted memories of the earlier title. But with that out of the way, it has accomplishments in its own right and is an example of how to develop an established style on a handheld. The only difficulties come from that bugbear of small-scale strategy games, movement around the environments, and its own inconsistencies of visual and narrative approach.

The game takes place over a series of rounds, and at the beginning of each you choose several members from your larger party to enter a scripted battlefield; sections of the ongoing story are then outlined by character dialogue. Your ship acts as a base from which you can create units, and the map can be seen but has to be explored to be able to watch enemy movements and find resources. The game makes neat use of the DS interface, and allows quick switching of the two screens to facilitate speedy stylus manoeuvres – but several moves could have been incorporated with greater ease for the player. In particular, switching into your ship to create units (which removes you from the action) proves a real chore in the fast-paced levels: if a cutscene is triggered on the battlefield, you'll be unceremoniously hauled out of your ship and have to re-enter it after the cutscene has ended, while the bases for each type of unit aren't particularly well distinguished and switching instantly between them without several intervening buttons is impossible.

The biggest problem is your troops' poor pathfinding ability. Compared to the quick pincer movements of the enemies, watching your carefully directed army walk into each other and painfully slowly correct themselves by walking one square left, two squares up, one square right, while an army approaches is frustrating to say the least. It almost ruins the game, but you'll find yourself factoring it into early movements and lining up your characters to prevent such chaos. Ultimately, the core strategic element of the game is so compelling that it renders these annoyances bearable, if never entirely forgivable.

Despite the occasionally frustrating moments, *Heroes Of Mana* has a game system of counters and strategy that is worthwhile. The dressing could be a little simpler, the difficulty spikes could be ironed out to make the whole experience a little smoother, and – most of all – the teeth-grindingly stupid movements of your troops could be more efficient. But after you've learned to accommodate the faults, in short bursts it can be a rewarding experience. **[6]**



More outlandish allies and enemies pop up as you progress, such as this rather attractive floating fish, but there are cockatrices and mushbooms as ever



The later battles can get hectic, and demand quick scrolling across a sizeable map – though there are quick keys and the screens can be switched for stylus control

Is that really you?



Among the irritations of the game are the lavish, hand-drawn character profiles which appear onscreen whenever the characters speak. Controlling squat sprite figures and watching them represented as lithe cartoon dreamboats whenever a plot point has to be explained gets a little tiresome, and creates a distance between the player and narrative that is unbridgeable. As well as this, what they're saying often verges on the soporific, and *Heroes Of Mana* doesn't stand out as one of Square Enix's better translated titles. The plot is high fantasy nonsense interspersed with dramatic moments between major players, who all happen to know each other in some way, and it quickly becomes tiresome – especially when used as little more than an excuse for some deus ex machina moments.



Space Giraffe's score counter is permanently changing as rainbow numbers fly towards the screen from destroyed enemies. This can be a little hypnotic itself, particularly when it's totting up your bonuses at the end of a level

SPACE GIRAFFE

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £5 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: LLAMASOFT



There are 100 levels in all, which go through wildly assorted permutations of vividly coloured wireframe surfaces, and can be either single planes or connected loops – both of which need surprisingly distinct movement and strategy

'*Space Giraffe* is NOT *Tempest*!' roars the first line of instructions in Jeff Minter's new game. No, this abstract shooter featuring a claw-like spaceship, in which enemies (NOT pulsars) gradually get closer to your baseline before flipping along it, is most definitely NOT *Tempest*. But it takes a bit of play to see why.

Initially, the game seems over-concepted: there are several variables to take into account to get anywhere near a decent score, while shooting enemies is less important than shooting their bullets, and overgrowing flowers can really ruin your day. But behind the confusing surface the basics are quite simple: enemies move towards the screen over a wireframe level, while a line (the 'power zone') also moves down but is pushed back with each foe destroyed. This power zone has to be kept active, both to slow down incoming obstacles and so that when enemies do make it to the rim they can be satisfyingly 'bulled' off all at once.

As well as this, for the precious higher score you can keep bullets in play by continually hitting them, and 'harvest' flower items, which all come to fruition at the end of the level. Among the enemies there are various permutations, including the brilliant 'Feedback Monster' which, when killed, causes your screen to assume a purplish hue and generally go psychedelically loopy.

Not that it won't be doing that anyway, thanks to the evolution of the graphics technology previously used by Llamasoft in creating Xbox 360's onboard light synthesiser. Playing in a dark room with the music turned up and on a caffeine buzz, it can be a hypnotic, sometimes blinding thrill. The rules that initially overwhelm quickly become second nature, and skimming the baseline with your craft, keeping the line just high enough with a flower, allowing a phalanx of enemies to line up for the big shove, while juggling a battery of bullets, is mesmerising. But there are two minor problems that create one major problem: the bullets can occasionally get lost in the psychedelic background, and when flowers have grown past the rim (and have therefore become deadly) they can be difficult to see. Engaging in the sensory overload completely and zipping around the rim is slightly tainted by the fact that you'll die occasionally without having seen what hit you, rather than seeing something too late to avoid it.

Something like that really matters when you're on a score of 65 million and aiming higher. You'll curse, but instantly refocus your eyes ready for another go, because *Space Giraffe* is generous enough with its restarts and inventive enough with its rearrangements to always demand another play. This is a simple game at heart, a game about learning the rules, becoming really good at manipulating the elements, and then getting a huge high score to brag about. And who could argue with that? **[8]**



The game is full of geek references to gaming language, with influences ranging from *Stop The Express* to *Super Mario Sunshine*. You're also rated in an uncompromising manner at the end of every level, from 'Meh' to 'Super mega awesome'

Techno techno techno flower



One of *Space Giraffe*'s greatest achievements is melding the psychedelic background content with the onscreen action, creating a well-judged balance between intensity and fun. The soundtrack thumps along and loops on itself, and you'll quickly find yourself in an intense frame of mind as the score racks up. One of the more delightful touches happens during this frenzied activity: after hitting certain Ox triggers, the bonus round is activated. Blast ships for points? Hit some asteroids, or zoom through a series of loops? No, the game instead completely slows down while ambient music begins to play, and you must proceed to collect flowers with your craft's 'hooves'. Each collection causes a tinkle to be added to the audio, cascading together to become mesmeric. In terms of making progress through the game it's a welcome relief from the visual and aural intensity of the later stages, and a victory in terms of pacing.



The visual effects sync up as your score gets higher, and can range from simple distortions of the background to a sheep's head moving in and out of the screen. Quite apart from the core game, *Space Giraffe*'s stylings could make it a Marmite among shooters and win it as many enemies as fans





GLORY DAYS 2

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: GHOSTLIGHT DEVELOPER: ODENIS STUDIOS

The millimetre-high troops storming *Glory Days'* battlefields and the sombre dwelling upon the title screen's accumulative death-roll might bring to mind the old *Cannon Fodder* mantra, 'war has never been so much fun', but the similarities end here. The last thing on *Glory Days'* mind is fun: it instead angrily stomps forward to the beat of the 'war is hell' drum.

Or at least that's what the mawkish letters from the front that scroll during its pre-mission screen would have you believe. Enter the fight itself and you're suddenly in a nonsensical combat scenario that casts you as both ace pilot and battlefield general. Both Biggles and bigwig, you have to deliver your fair share of aerial kills and bombing runs while ensuring troops are airlifted to key strategic points and that HQ churns out sufficient fodder.

It's perhaps too much to call it strategy. Micro-management begins and ends with a single pop-up menu, and seizing ground is less *Battlefield* and more tug-of-war. Two teams (of nondescript nationality) approach a strip of land from either end. Along it lie derelict bases and, as in *Advance Wars*, they are seized by foot soldiers – wiping out any current squatters. But even this simple tactical conundrum grows screamingly frustrating when paired with something as simple as a *Defender* clone.

Activating the unit-manufacturing menu takes away plane control, resulting in a few new riflemen in exchange for a general as you promptly plough into the ground.





The game benefits from customisable twoplayer battles, but this is one of the few additions over the GBA original, itself a riff on *Rescue Raiders*

Alternatively, the time it takes to pull off a single focused bombing run is enough for a platoon-shaped gap to form in your ever-marching attack queue. There's no winning either way.

Mastering plane combat is a battle in itself. Squeezed on to the DS screen, there's only so far the camera can zoom out from the *Choplifter*-esque air corridor before you're piloting a cutting-edge pixel. As a result, more rival planes fall to clumsy nose-to-nose prangings than intended gunnery – thanks also to the separate clammy D-pad and stylus control schemes. There's a reason pilots don't command battlefields, and while *Glory Days 2* raises an interesting 'what if...?' it only confirms what we already knew. **[4]**



The game certainly sports one of the finer soundtracks we've heard on DS. Rousing battle anthems and satisfying rat-a-tat-tat drum rolls help inspire during the many times of woe



WING COMMANDER ARENA

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £5 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: GAIA INDUSTRIES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E175



Any way you look at it, branding this game with the *Wing Commander* label is either ineffective or actually counter-productive. Those who don't remember the earlier games in Origin's epic space-simulation series will find the association irrelevant; those who do will be nonplussed by the move to include this top-down arcade shooter as part of its legacy. Save for its space setting, *Arena* bears little resemblance to the older games that have carried the *Wing Commander* name. The most remarkable departure is that the action is reduced to a single plane, the occasional loop-the-loop evasion manoeuvre being the only time that the game experiments with a vertical axis.

Of course, it would be unfair to judge *Arena* only by its divergence from *Wing Commander's* past – but, even when taken on its own merits,



A straight port, replete with chunky graphics, would have been preferable to this interpretation of *Wing Commander*. Nostalgia aside, *Arena* doesn't cut it as an arcade-styled game, either

this is, at its best, a throwaway shoot 'em up of limited scope and mediocre construction. It's just never very exciting – the restriction to the horizontal makes dogfighting limp, and the weapons lack impact thanks to loose collision detection.

While there are a fair few options regarding the kind of ships you can fly, and a token effort to vary the nature of the missions, such changes never really manage to add much colour to the core gameplay. Multiplayer is a more lively affair, and its expanded options for play suggest it is here that the game's aspirations lie. Unfortunately, its essential blandness cannot be overcome by the introduction of human opponents; *Arena* simply doesn't compete with other Arcade diversions for online play – a fact underscored by the enduring delights of *Bomberman Live*, released just the week before.

Given that many excellent titles of previous generations find themselves languishing in the bargain bin, the low cost of many Xbox Live Arcade titles is not an excuse for a sparse feature-set and substandard build quality. Perhaps EA would have done better to port a previous *Wing Commander* game in its totality rather than staple the name to a somewhat anaemic effort of an awkwardly inauthentic shape. **[4]**





Occasionally, the camera makes it difficult to tell whether the environment's geometry will interrupt your flight path, especially given your ship's over-generous collision boundaries


Xenogears

TIME EXTEND

XENOGEARS

FORMAT: PS1
PUBLISHER: SQUARE
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN: JAPAN
RELEASE DATE: 1998 (JAPAN)

Was SquareSoft's other bold, trailblazing PS1 RPG too ambitious for its medium? Or is it simply that nobody's since dared dream so big?

Considered by some to be a multimillion-yen, convoluted science-fiction vanity project, *Xenogears* nevertheless remains one of the most keenly eulogised PlayStation RPGs. Viewed ungenerously, it's a confused hotchpotch of play styles, lacking focus and consistency across its 60 hours of winding, occasionally incomprehensible adventuring. Detractors argue that the game's been propelled to cult status for little more than a marrying of overwrought philosophical posturing with big stompy robots, that classic infatuation for the college student fanboy.

But in its defence, *Xenogears'* devoted fanbase points to a game which, through labyrinthine mythology, deep, multiple battle systems and a dizzying parade of cute narrative and gameplay set-pieces, comfortably outstretches most contemporary videogames in scope and ambition. It remains writer and director Tetsuya Takahashi's most challenging and pure work, the game from which his ill-fated *Xenosaga* series was birthed, but never quite matched up to.

Takahashi and his team, many of whom worked on the Super Nintendo's much-loved action-RPG *Chrono Trigger*, manage to create a believable and authentic universe through intimately knowing its every minutiae, past and present. The sheer amount of precise detail to this imagined universe is staggering. Even before the time at which the game begins, the project's team of four scriptwriters laid out 10,000 years of intricate history.

This complex tapestry of alternate time is split across three different eras, driven by myriad different technologies and populated by species given their own nomenclature. Nations fight nations in the dim and distant past, legacies of wars and alliances domino-running through time up to the game's start point. These details are then revealed in dribs and drabs, as appropriate, through cutscenes and recollections over the course of the game. As characters past and present play their parts on this vast stage, a cat's cradle of inter-relational threads crisscross to pull the story together. But it's in *Xenogears'* lead protagonist that videogames have found their most complicated Freudian hero.

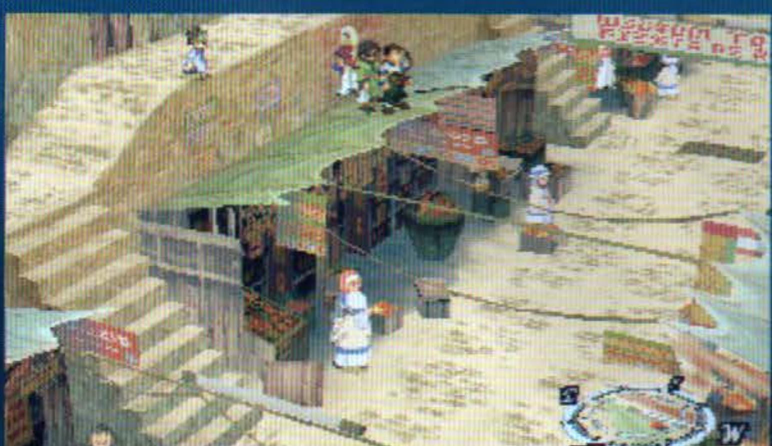


Xenogears never saw a European release, leaving one dedicated group of Italian gamers to extract all the text files from the US version in order to translate the entire game and release a patch

With an unknown backstory we, the player, are free to superimpose something of our own background and history on to this clean slate

There's an obvious reason why Japanese RPGs are often stories about orphans. In countless examples of the genre we're introduced to a teenage protagonist who, years earlier, was deposited uninvited on to a kindly townsman's doorstep. With an unknown backstory we, the player, are free to superimpose something of our own background and history on to this clean slate. The game allows us to take on a role that is at once other, but not so fully developed as to squeeze our own personalities and imaginations out of the frame. And, of course, the orphan's predicament draws immediate empathy as well as delivering an urgent overarching purpose to our adventure: the discovery and realisation of who our character really is.

Xenogears is one such story but,



The themes of a hundred sci-fi plots echo through *Xenogears*: a generation of women born sterile; the capping of human potential by immortal leaders; a cloaked city suspended high above the ocean invisible to its non-citizens





THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

Thanks to the struggling translation and rushed second disc, many of *Xenogears'* deeper plot details were difficult to fathom. As if to more fully explain the game, Takahashi's team released Perfect Works, a Japanese-only, high-quality art book that instantly became the *Xenogears* bible to fans. Meticulously translated from Japanese, pages and pages of explanation and exegesis were spilled into fanzines and on to the internet unravelling the remaining plot mysteries. Indeed, revisiting the game now, with the clearer background picture painted by this separate work, makes the story much more enjoyable, so it's recommended reading to anyone thinking of playing the game today.



like all interesting creations, twists its genre conventions into new shapes. We're introduced to a presumed orphan, Fei Fong Wong, a young man who was brought to the remote village of Lahan years earlier on a stormy night by a cloaked stranger. Remembering nothing of his life before, Fei, in some ways, conforms to the classic stereotypical lead character, but we quickly discover he's anything but a blank canvas. Within an hour of play Fei has levelled his home village in an act of brutal destruction, killing his best friends – who you were busily helping prepare for their wedding the next day.

The scene is handled with deft expertise. Lahan is a village on the outskirts of a country at war with its neighbour. That night the war spills into the village when a group of military Gears (*Xenogears'* mechs) crash land while attempting to steal one of their enemy's top-of-the-line machines. While the elders try to evacuate the village from the ensuing firefight between the thieves and pursuers, Fei climbs into the stolen Gear and turns its guns on both sets of intruders. In the ensuing battle he blanks out in a moment of extreme rage. You awake to a scene of absolute destruction, surrounded by a group of surviving villagers whose friends and families Fei slaughtered. As a player, you feel awkward and ashamed in the presence of these NPCs, a guilty confusion and helplessness which perfectly mirrors that felt by your character and justifies his immediate exile.

As the game develops and reveals its mysteries we discover how Fei was psychologically abused by an impostor posing as his mother when he was three years old; of how he tried to explain the abuse to his father but, with limited vocabulary, was never taken seriously; of how Fei's personality, as a result of these devastating events, split into three parts: the Freudian ego, superego, and id; of how Fei is in fact the reincarnation of a boy called Abel who was involved in a deadly explosion 10,000 years before (the one seen in the opening anime sequence) and how, once in every generation since then, he has been reborn with a world-saving purpose. *Xenogears'* protagonist is a far cry from the simplistic two-dimensional leads of SquareSoft's Super Nintendo RPGs of just a few years earlier.

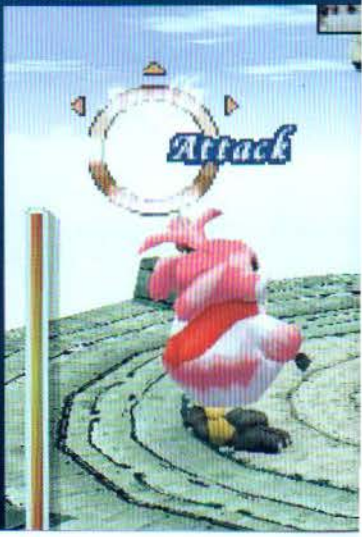
Within an hour, Fei has levelled his home village in an act of brutal destruction, killing his best friends who were getting married the next day

Fei's ultimate purpose is the destruction of an ancient sentient (but man-made) weapon which crash landed on to the planet. Here the developer again chooses to turn convention on its head. While at first glance this weapon, named Deus (which uses an avatar to carry out its will on the planet), appears to conform to the conventional antagonist type, it's revealed that it is in fact responsible for human life on the planet. Man was created in order to be harvested so that Deus could rebuild itself. As such, Fei is battling against his race's very creator, allowing the game to explore philosophy, religion and Man's relationship to the divine.

Herein lies the game's great controversy: it consistently appears to be attacking organised religion (as the tool of a hateful god) and as such it only narrowly escaped being side-stepped from US release. However, it was hardly easy to follow. The concentration it required to explore and understand 10,000 years of alternate history in an alternate universe laden with metaphor and allegory was hardly aided by its flawed script. While in the micro sense of communicating the soap-opera lives of its characters the dialogue is often witty and knowing, the overarching macro plot elements are ill served by a muddied translation.

In fact, the game, born at a time when companies outsourced much of their localisation work, was reportedly sent back to the translation team for a rewrite as the original script was just too unclear and impenetrable. Many gamers simply gave up on trying to

The game's battle systems work on a variation of the system used in *Chrono Trigger*. Players must work quickly to place attacks before their opponents







The *Xenogears* soundtrack was handled by another of the *Chrono Trigger* team, Yasunori Mitsuda, and is hailed as his best. For the game's final song Joanne Hogg, Irish singer of the band Iona, provided vocals



The game doesn't only reference religion and highbrow philosophy. Science fiction films such as Star Wars and Soylent Green are frequently alluded to through the dialogue and scenes



stay abreast of the story and simply allowed the more easily digestible machinations of the plot and, crucially, the compulsive battle system and enjoyable action-adventure exploration to spur them on.

Since the game presents fully 3D environments (as opposed to *Final Fantasy*'s prerendered backgrounds), these exploratory sections play very differently to most RPGs of the time. Rooftops can be leaped between while hidden items must be found by negotiating wide gaps. In this way, the game often feels more like a platformer, and as a result is unexpectedly accessible and welcoming to a non-RPG audience.

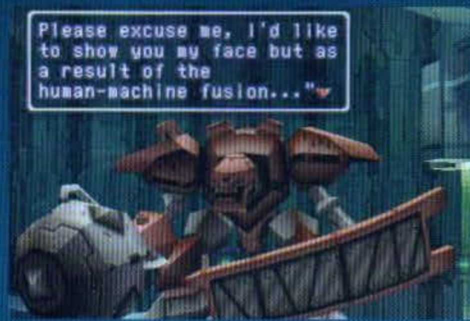
Likewise, the game's twin battle systems are fast-paced and enjoyable. The on-foot fights, viewed from the side, map different strength attacks to each of the face buttons. By stringing combinations of these together, impressive beat 'em up-style moves can be executed. Different button presses cost different amounts of Action Points (AP) depending on their strength and you may 'spend' up to each character's AP limit during a turn. Towards the end of the game, with up to 28 AP available to your characters, huge and devastating combination moves can be played out, and this tangible and exciting augmentation to your abilities drives the entire game.



In addition to the small-scale battles, characters sometimes mount their Gears for huge, screen-filling face offs. A variation on the AP system maintains consistency with the main battle mechanics, but subtle differences in its workings break up the potential monotony in an area of RPGs which frequently tires or bores players over the long haul.

The ambition displayed in the plot, exploration mechanics and battle systems comes at a cost, however. While *Xenogears* is spread across two discs, the player's experience during the second portion of the game is vastly different to that of the first. With their imaginations running wild, it's clear that a great deal of the developers' attention was expended on the first half of the game before time or budget restraints forced them to rush the game to completion. As a result, the second half of the game relies ever more heavily on non-interactive cutscenes, granting the player only the occasional dungeon for variety – a far cry from the darting, inventive interactivity of the first half.

In some ways, *Xenogears*' gigantic narrative is a grand demonstration of what can go wrong, and right, when a single-minded development team is given free rein and financing to do as it pleases. It's a game that has clearly been fashioned by an auteur whose imagination and ambition outstripped even the gargantuan budget SquareSoft allowed him. Exquisite in both its macrocosmic epic narrative, and its cute and playful microcosmic soap opera, *Xenogears* has missed a top place in the western videogaming canon. In part this is thanks to a botched translation, but mainly it's due to that scourge of the unfettered developer, a deadline rushed thanks to interminable feature creep.



While the *Xenosaga* games are related to *Xenogears*, Square held the rights and new publisher Namco maintained some distance between the two projects. By the time of the second *Xenosaga*'s release, Takahashi had been effectively removed from the project





THE NAME OF GOD

Famously, the game draws names from many different world religions and philosophers. The two warring nations at the start of the game, Aveh and Kislev, are named after two months in the Jewish calendar. Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve's sons from Genesis, are two of the key characters in the story, while the Ethos, the game's organised church, resembles the Catholic church in vestments, buildings and the detail of its ceremonies. Not all of the influences are quite so orthodox, however: besides the fact that the game was allegedly intended to be Episode V in a longer series, many of its plot twists echo those of Star Wars.





THE MAKING OF...
SYSTEM SHOCK 2

An inexperienced team working on the sequel to one of the most respected games in PC history. It sounds like a recipe for horror. And it was – but in a good way

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **EA** DEVELOPER: **IRRATIONAL GAMES** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1999**

The lights are low. Everyone's fighting in a panic against a seemingly impossible, oppressive deadline. At every turn there's a crippling lack of resources. By any objective criteria, the small, inexperienced team doesn't have the skills to achieve its aims and is crammed into a single room – half of one, in fact, since it's one room bisected with screens. When you look at where and how Irrational worked on its first game, it's easy to think of the claustrophobic horror of *System Shock 2* as a pure product of its environment.

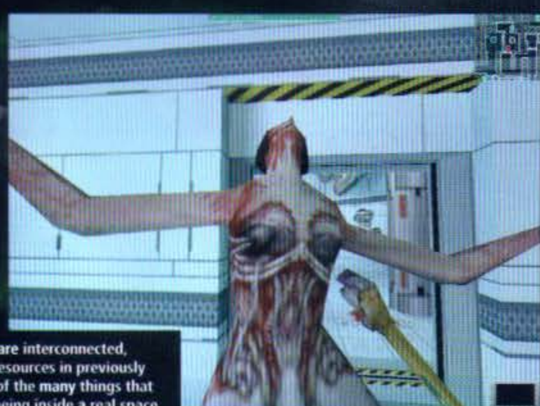
In fact, when looking at their situation in their early years, you begin to wonder why Irrational's co-founders **Ken Levine**, Rob Fermier and Jonathan Chey splintered from Boston's illustrious and much-missed Looking Glass Studios in the first place. "Looking Glass was obviously a really impactful experience on me," Levine explains. "It was my first job in the games industry. I'd met a lot of people who I really respected and admired – people whose legacy is more known to the intelligentsia of the gaming field, and is still being felt. I left because despite how talented the people were there, in some ways it was more like a university than a games company. There really was a dialogue about advancing the media, but not a lot about making successful products."

Coming from a film-industry background, Levine felt the company needed to find a balance between art and commerce: "I thought, probably naively at the time, 'Hey! I can do that'. I had no idea what that would actually mean, as I was a cocky guy who thought it'd be easy. We went off on our own and very quickly found it was challenging." Almost fatally so. The company's first project, a singleplayer version of early isometric shooter *Fireteam*, had been cancelled when its publisher decided to concentrate solely on multiplayer. This left Irrational at a loss, until Paul Neurath, head of Looking Glass, called with an opportunity. While they'd left Looking Glass, they were still on good terms with their previous employer. In fact, their half room was actually buried in a corner of the larger studio.

"At Looking Glass Studios there really was a dialogue about advancing the media, but not a lot about making successful products"

Neurath's offer was incredibly open. Looking Glass had, in making *Thief: The Dark Project*, developed its own in-house engine. All of Irrational were experienced with it, having all





System Shock 2's levels are interconnected, allowing you to access resources in previously explored areas. It's one of the many things that increase the illusion of being inside a real space





The final level of the game takes place inside the memory of SHODAN herself, which reprises the visual style of the original *System Shock* game, intermixed with clean vector lines to simulate the incompleteness of its vision



worked on *Thief*. Why not make a game with it with us? Any game you fancy, really. "We immediately started designing," Levine recalls. "The three partners sat down, and we ended up with a game design which was basically our design for *Shock 2*, but in a totally different world. It was a kind of Heart Of Darkness story, with a military commander gone crazy and your mission was to go to this crazy spaceship and assassinate him." This was pitched around various publishers. The one that bit was Electronic Arts, which – through its purchase of Origin – was in possession of the *System Shock* IP. EA suggested that the game could, in fact, be *System Shock 2*. "And we said, 'Um... sure'," Levine laughs. "I rewrote the story and changed a few of the things, but the game design never changed."

It was a rare opportunity. The original *System Shock* was one of the games that made Levine want to move into the videogame industry in the first place. What made it so special? "The feeling of being in a real place," he raves. "The feeling of a mystery, of unravelling it – not in an adventure game way, but in the context of an action game. You arrive and... what happened? That's a really good storytelling mechanism." Austin Grossman and Doug Church's original idea from *Shock* was something Irrational expanded in its sequel. "In *Shock 1* you were a specific guy, you had a backstory," Levine notes. "With *Shock 2*, I started you out with the classic 'wake up with amnesia'."

Abstract techniques and settings weren't all the *Shock* licence gave the team. It gave Irrational access to one of videogaming's most startling antagonists, the hubristic artificial intelligence SHODAN. In the first *System Shock*, she frustrated and mocked the player at every turn, a rare case of a game's primary antagonist being an almost constant presence. "My job was to present SHODAN in a fresh way," Levine says. "You've encountered her in the first game, and if she says the same things, why is it *Shock 2*? Why isn't it *Shock 1.5*?" The result was to team SHODAN up with the player as a prickly, uncomfortable ally – but an ally nevertheless. "That was pretty daring for the time," says Levine of the AI's introduction. "Villains appeared in cutscenes, did their thing and then disappeared when you jumped on their head three times. It was really fun to try and do something more sophisticated. That twist at the beginning – even how she was introduced to you – was an important part of continuing her character and making sure the player knew what they were dealing with."

"Villains did their thing and then disappeared when you jumped on their head. It was really fun to do something more sophisticated"

In the working partnership with Looking Glass, Irrational provided the design, art and programming, while its old company provided the Dark Engine's technology base and the services of its quality assurance team. Looking Glass also provided other talents, including sound maestro Eric Brosius (who has been involved with everything from *Thief* to *Guitar Hero*). His work on *System Shock 2* is particularly memorable. "One of the reasons he creates such powerful soundscapes is that he creates a soundspace which has a bit of ambiguity to it," Levine argues. "You can't identify every single thing you can hear. Sounds, voices, things people are saying, things you can't hear that are of unclear meaning. That creates a great deal of tension. It adds another element of mystery, another element of suspense." Audio is undoubtedly one of *System Shock 2*'s highpoints, with designer, writer and wife of Eric, Terri Brosius, reprising her role as SHODAN, sitting alongside a host of memorable roles, from mutants to robots to... psionic monkeys?

The latter, while one of the most fondly remembered of the game's cast, were actually an fortuitous accident. Finishing a mo-cap session two hours early, Levine was bullied by Jon Chey into just doing *something* to justify the time they'd paid for. "So I said



SHODAN AND TELL

While fair as a simplification, the division of Looking Glass to just providing technology and QA with Irrational handing design and programming doesn't get the whole story. There are many fingerprints on *System Shock 2*. For example, the reveal that Dr Janice Polito – who guided the player through the opening section – was actually long dead, and SHODAN had been impersonating her, was scripted by the future project lead of *Thief: Deadly Shadows*, Randy Smith. The horrifying sequence when walls slide apart to reveal the AI's visage is one of the game's more memorable, and its chilling effect is an early precursor to Smith's later fear-based work in levels like *Thief 3*'s much-admired The Cradle.





Low-level spawning would repopulate areas with monsters. Despite being a controversial decision, it ensured that players were constantly on edge while making their way around





The low-detail character models – behind the curve even at the time of release – have gained attention from the PC modding community: a mod pack exists which adds new, high-resolution alternatives. While more detailed, they arguably lack some of the conceptual finesse of the originals

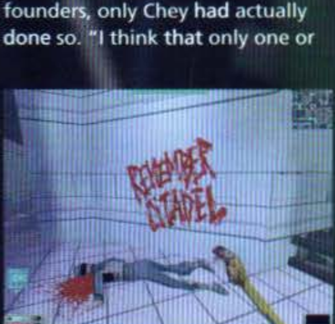


[to the motion-capture actor]: 'Do monkey motions'," Levine says. "We had no monkeys in the game, but we did it anyway." These assets had to find a home, and Levine hit on the idea of lab-experimented apes gaining sentience, and being justifiably annoyed about their treatment at the hands of Man. "All those story elements we had to back-solve. I find I tend to write best in those situations, when I have a constraint set already," Levine remembers. "I had these psychic monkeys... so I had to work out how and why, in a way which wasn't ridiculous and hopefully kinda scary. When my back's to a wall, I tend to work better." Not that everyone saw the appeal of psychic monkeys from the outset: "Everyone else was: 'Dude, you're fucking insane. We're not having monkeys in the game!'"

That was about as easy as the development got. Every element was problematic. "No time. No money. I had no experience," Levine states. "I'd never shipped a game before that." In fact, of the three founders, only Chey had actually done so. "I think that only one or two people on the *team* had shipped a game before," Levine adds. "That was a blessing and a curse. We had no idea what we were doing in some ways, but we also had no idea what we couldn't do. That's why the game feels innovative to some degree, as we were figuring it out as we went along." It wasn't just the team that was inexperienced; the Dark Engine itself was far from finished technology, as *Shock 2* was well under way before *Thief* came out. "It was still pretty broken," Levine says. "It ended up giving us a lot of powerful things, but it constrained us in a lot of ways." For example, the oft-ridiculed low-polygon models resulted from having to make a conservative guess at what the engine would definitely be able to manage and still be playable. There was also some misplaced effort in creating the co-op multiplayer which was patched into the game post release. "It was a real distraction," Levine laments. "There are a number of people who really enjoyed it, but the amount of time versus the amount of reward for that versus what we could have done with the rest of the game... I don't think it was a win. The singleplayer game would have been much, much, much stronger if we had that time back."

Not that it hurt *Shock 2*'s critical standing; despite slender sales ("I don't know the exact figures, but it certainly wasn't a blockbuster"), the game has grown in people's minds since, a key influence on the hype for Irrational's *BioShock* (see p88). "When I first did it, people would just look at me unless they were the intelligentsia of the intelligentsia of the industry," Levine says. "But now there's so many people who know it. I'd imagine if the game was still available commercially, it'd still be selling – and would probably have been a small success at that point. It may have made money because it was so cheap to produce."

Away from the matters of its financial performance, in terms of why it lingers in the imagination, Levine settles on the immaterial. Despite all the problems of its development, *Shock 2* engaged with the imagination. "I think it has an atmosphere. Not a lot of games have atmosphere, and that really draws people," he argues. "It's not a Lord Of The Rings atmosphere, and I think people are drawn to that."



Weapon degradation was a key element in *Shock 2*, with firearms requiring upkeep to prevent jamming. The rate could be modified post-patch



SYSTEM SHOCK: SLIGHT RETURN

System Shock 2 differed from the original in many ways – with its addition of formal roleplaying statistics and character growth, for example – but in one key area it was similar. Both games were made by raw, hungry teams. "Paul Neurath was experienced, having done a couple of games, but the rest of us were essentially a bunch of college kids who hadn't been playing games since high school," recalls *System Shock* project lead **Doug Church**. Even more so, since when *Shock* was made in 1994, the firstperson 3D game wasn't formalised in the way it was later in the decade. They were making it up on the fly, from first principles. Church: "It was a pain in the ass in a lot of ways, but there's something nice about not knowing what you're doing."





SHODAN is kept off-stage for almost the entire initial third of the game. This makes her reveal all the more memorable, in a scripted sequence where the walls fall back showing massed display banks

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: NCsoft Europe

DATE FOUNDED: September 2004

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 117

KEY STAFF: Adam Martin, Ken Malcolm, Thomas Bidaux



URL: eu.plaync.com/eu/

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Lineage 2, City Of Heroes, City Of Villains, Guild Wars







All of NCsoft's games to date originated outside of the UK, but it now has a Brighton-based dev team

NCSOFT®



LOCATION:
Brighton, UK

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Undisclosed online game

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"As part of Korea-based NCsoft Corporation, the world's leading developer and publisher of online games, we are a major player in the world of MMOG and online games development. In just three years, NCsoft Europe has already built up considerable expertise in publishing, localisation and marketing, and has recently started an internal development studio to focus on creating new titles and new technologies.

"We're based in the heart of Brighton, a thriving seaside city, just five minutes' walk from the beach. Although we work closely with our American and Korean counterparts, we're an autonomous studio. We work on new IP for the European market, but always with a view to the wider international market for online games.

"We're mostly focused on PC, but with recent deals such as our Sony exclusive we're also starting to look at a wider variety of platforms for developing and publishing online games. We've managed to retain a relaxed working environment with very little in the way of bureaucracy, despite having already grown to well over 100 people. As the company that launched the first mainstream subscription-free MMOG (*Guild Wars*), we're constantly innovating with online business models and at the cutting edge of design and development processes."



University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities



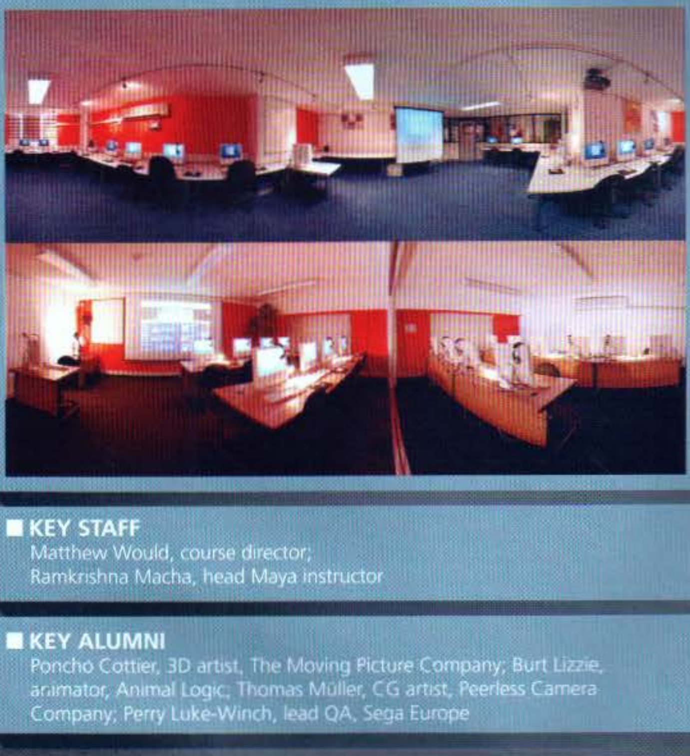
qantm COLLEGE

INSTITUTION NAME: Qantm College

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 50 (globally 800)

URL: www.qantm.co.uk

CONTACT: +44 (0)845 017 1015 info@qantm.co.uk



KEY STAFF

Matthew Would, course director;
Ramkrishna Macha, head Maya instructor

KEY ALUMNI

Poncho Cottier, 3D artist, The Moving Picture Company; Burt Lizzie, animator, Animal Logic; Thomas Müller, CG artist, Peerless Camera Company; Perry Luke-Winch, lead QA, Sega Europe





Founded in Australia in 1996, Quantm College focuses on new media, with courses tailored around industrial trends and links with business



LOCATION:

London, UK;
Brisbane, Australia;
Melbourne, Australia;
Sydney, Australia;
Vienna, Austria;
Munich, Germany;
Amsterdam, Holland

COURSES OFFERED:

BA(Hons) Game Design & Development, 3D Animation, Web Design & Development, Multimedia arts;
Bsc(Hons)* Games Programming;
BA(Hons)* Interactive Animation

*subject to validation

INSIDE VIEW: ALEX PIGLOWSKI

"Before Qantm I studied interior design, and part of this course was a 3D aspect, which got me interested in furthering my knowledge in the 3D industry. It was the creative aspect of the degree that really fired me up and actually inspired me to look at moving forward with 3D as a real career option. A friend, who had been studying at the same campus, suggested Qantm would be a great way to get into it. After looking at other courses I was drawn to Qantm mainly because of the fact I'd actually be learning Maya and also get right into the 'fun stuff', which meant I had an instant creative output! Each week there are always the very intensive lectures, which you have to just get your head down and absorb; alongside these there is plenty of individual tutor time, which is great in case you missed a detail in one of the lectures. There's a great working relationship between students and staff, which promotes a very accessible way to fully explore the topic being covered. I often find myself coming in at 3am and working on projects because I know I won't be the only one in there and there's always a really relaxed and jokey atmosphere.

The people studying here actually want to be here, which makes for a fantastically creative and progressive environment. It's great that I have the option to go and work abroad and still have the industry acceptance of a Qantm qualification which is known the world over; that got helped a lot by the number of international students studying at Qantm London."



Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

The state of middleware

When it comes to fashions in gaming technology, it's the old-school firstperson shooter studios that are currently in the ascendancy

With the twin news peaks of the Game Developers Conference and Siggraph behind us, it's an appropriate time to consider what general trends are occurring in the wider world of gaming middleware and tools.

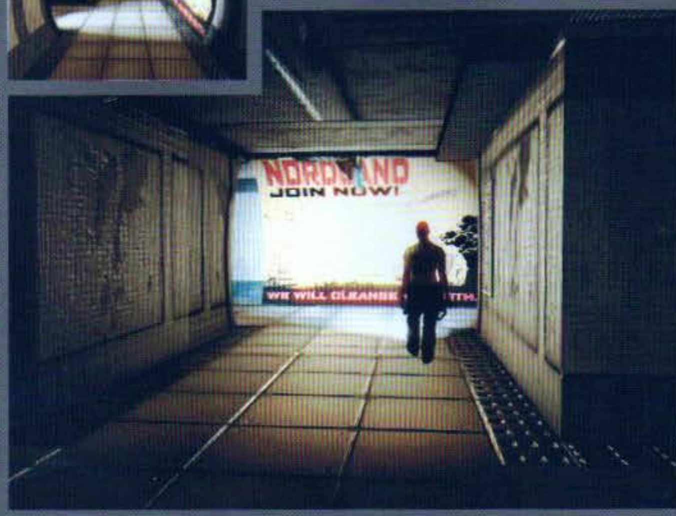
Overall, activity seems remarkably quiet, especially in terms of licensing technology for console development. Many studios seem to have made their choices in terms of what outside assistance they need to make PS3 and 360 games, with the familiar components used during the last console cycle, such as Havok's physics, doing good repeat business. The result has been a tailing off of announcements about new products from middleware companies.



Crytek has licensed its technology to four developers since GDC, and more are certain to come on board as the *Crysis* bandwagon rolls on

This is in stark contrast to the PC space, however, where Epic's Unreal Engine 3 is finally getting some competition, initially thanks to Crytek's CryEngine 2. Vaunted in part thanks to the hype building up around *Crysis*, and in part due to that game's position as the de facto launch title for Microsoft's DirectX10, Crytek has been regularly firing off press releases since the technology's official launch at GDC.





Cambridge-based Geomerics has raised investment of £2 million from Trinity Hall, University of Cambridge, to further develop its Enlighten global illumination technology for consoles

Significantly, three of these deals are for massively multiplayer online games with the most prominent being Swedish operator MindArk, which is planning to move the client-side code of its *Project Entropia* over to CryEngine 2 by the middle of 2008. In addition, Korean developer WeMade Entertainment has licensed the engine for its MMOG, *NED*, while US startup Avatar Reality is using it for its unnamed Martian-themed game.

Also looking to ride the wave of a resurgent PC sector is id's John Carmack, who's used the opportunity afforded both by the Apple Worldwide Developers Conference and QuakeCon to talk up the idTech 5 technology. As well as being the first engine not to be named after the id game it was developed for (under the old system it would be called the Rage Engine), idTech 5 is also the first to be designed for consoles, with compatibility claimed across PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 as well as Windows, Mac and Linux.

The incredible success of Epic's Unreal Engine 3, combined with the global opportunity to sell technology into emerging development markets such as eastern Europe and Asia, seems to have made the difference this time around. Previously, while always making its technology available for other companies to licence, id didn't highlight the fact, and certainly didn't embrace consoles. Now, however, it's even happy to break out the licensing terms on its website: at least for its current idTech 4, which could be yours for $250,000 up front, plus a five per cent wholesale royalty on sales.

Of course, having the choice of Unreal 3, idTech 5 or CryEngine 2 is excellent news for those developers looking to quickly get a game project off the ground. The competition should also keep prices steady and allow some room for negotiation. But what's interesting is that these are all technologies associated with game development studios, and studios that make fast-paced shooter-style games at





Unreal Engine 3 (right) remains the most popular middleware engine but it's now getting competition from CryEngine 2 and id Tech 5. The success of Skymatter's Mudbox 3D sculpting package (below) saw the firm being acquired by Autodesk

that. The pure middleware developers who argued their generic solutions would be more suitable for the complexities of game-making seem to have been proved wrong.

Another useful way of uncovering what's hot in the middleware market is to track the acquisitions and the movement of investment capital. And the past couple of months have seen plenty of activity.

Least surprising was huge art tools company Autodesk's decision to buy Skymatter, a small startup out of Weta Digital, which has quickly broken into the videogame and film markets with its innovative Mudbox 3D sculpting package. Offering complementary features to Autodesk's existing 3DS Max and Maya tools, the ability to integrate Mudbox into the art pipeline it can offer customers is sure to provide Autodesk with future upselling opportunities. The sale should also be good for future iterations of Mudbox, as the main Skymatter team will relocate from New Zealand to Montreal to be closer to Autodesk's development staff. The price Autodesk paid for Skymatter hasn't been disclosed.

When it comes to gaining investment, two companies at difference stages of their development, as well as offering different products, have been raising cash. The most impressive, at least in terms of the amount, is Emergent Game Technologies, which raised $12 million (£6 million) in its series D round of funding. One of the oldest middleware companies – it formed as Numerical Design Limited back in 1980s – it merged with a failing online technologies company in 2005 to form Emergent.

Since then, the combined concern has radically expanded its business, offering exotic solutions such as automatic game building and testing tools alongside its long-running Gamebryo engine. The extra cash will be required as it continues to work on rolling out its key online game server engine and online hosting infrastructure, as well as its operations in the Korean and Chinese markets. To that degree, it's a bet by the investors that the online gaming market will continue to exhibit such explosive growth.

It's a bet by the investors that the online gaming market will continue to exhibit such explosive growth



At a much earlier point in its lifecycle is Cambridge-based company Geomerics, which has raised £2 million from Trinity Hall, University of Cambridge, to further develop its Enlighten lighting technology, as well as create new products based around its Geometric Algebra approach to solving complex mathematical problems. What's important to note in this case is that the money comes from an academic institution. To that extent it's a vote of confidence in Geomerics' intellectual rigor – although that's rarely enough on its own to guarantee success.

Perhaps the most significant event that's occurred during 2007, however, concerns Canadian middleware provider Engenuity. It was bought by another Canadian company, commercial simulation giant CAE, in February with Engenuity's AI.implant artificial intelligence engine seen as a key reason for the deal, thanks to its increasing use in large-scale military simulations.

Indeed, this became so important that in the six months since, CAE decided that such markets are commercially much more interesting than the gaming middleware sector. The result is a new 'no-cost' gaming licence for AI.implant, which sees game developers get the technology's source code for free, and agree to certain marketing conditions when their games are released. The rub is that Engenuity won't offer the same level of support or promise future development of the gaming product, especially in terms of console games. Instead it will be replaced with an online web-based community resource of tutorials, documentation and forums.

Of course, it's a move that makes complete commercial sense for CAE, which is a company with a turnover of over $1 billion. AI.implant's game sales would have only been a tiny fraction of that. But combined with other acquisitions which have resulted in gaming middleware being taken off the market, such as Activision's purchase of Demonware and EA's of Criterion, it does increase the perceived risk of using middleware.

And maybe that's another reason why it's the fiercely and financially independent game developers such as Epic and id that are currently in the ascendancy.



US engine and online tools company Emergent has raised $12 million to expand its Asia operations, as well as complete its online games hosting technology



BY JEFF MINTER

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

THE GIRAFFE IS LOOSE

Space Giraffe passed final certification at Microsoft last Friday, and has been assigned a provisional release date of August 22. It's time for a look back over the process of getting the game certified, and I've learned some lessons I'll be able to apply to the next game I make.

I have to admit that the whole process of release has been one of the most stressful things I've ever done in my time in the games business. Not because of anything bad at the Microsoft end, really – the process itself is logical and fair – but I think because I had different expectations of it due to how things had been when I was working at Atari.

At Atari I was working on firstparty titles, and the process at the end of a game's development was basically that when you got close you were summoned to Sunnyvale, California, and spent a few weeks in the office right alongside your testing team, working in realtime to bash all the bugs and get to final code.

This was a stressful process in itself, since basically you'd go in the office every day and a great herd of people would bash on your code deliberately to nit-pick and take issue with every little thing. You'd get to dread the sound of the test lead's footsteps coming to your cube with the latest bug reports.

A few weeks of that and you were drained, but mercifully it was only a few weeks, and then everything would be done, so the stress was sustainable.

The actual process with Microsoft is similar to that in some aspects – although the kind of testing they do and the things that they are looking for are probably a bit more complex than they were back in the Jaguar days, largely due to the fact that consoles are routinely connected to the internet and that games are far more thoroughly localised these days. The big difference, though, and the one that caught me out, was that the process isn't really realtime like it was at Atari. In the office at Sunnyvale you could get a bug list, address the issues raised, release a new build of the game and then be getting reports from that in the space of a few hours. It was like a continuous dialogue between you and the testers.

Being on-site with testers for a firstparty game is a lot different from being off-site with a thirdparty game, however. Testing is a finite resource, and you don't get it all, all the time. The dialogue between the developers and the testers is way more protracted. You're not doing report-fix-release-test in a few hours – typically, you can wait a week or two between releasing a new revision into the testing process and getting enough feedback through to begin addressing the issues.

> I have to admit that the whole process of release has been one of the most stressful things I've ever done in the games business

There isn't anything bad or wrong in that, as everyone's in pretty much the same boat, and the guys in testing are actually pretty good and do a great job of preparing you for the final certification. It's just that I went into things kind of all revved-up and stressed-out expecting an Atari-like pace of progression through it all, and instead encountered this whole stretched-out process I really wasn't ready for.

It just kind of spread out the stress over a much longer timescale, and ended up really exhausting me.

Still, you live and learn, and now I know much better what to expect next time. I know now that it actually *is* possible for a small, two-man team to go through all this and come out with some code that is up to a publishable standard.

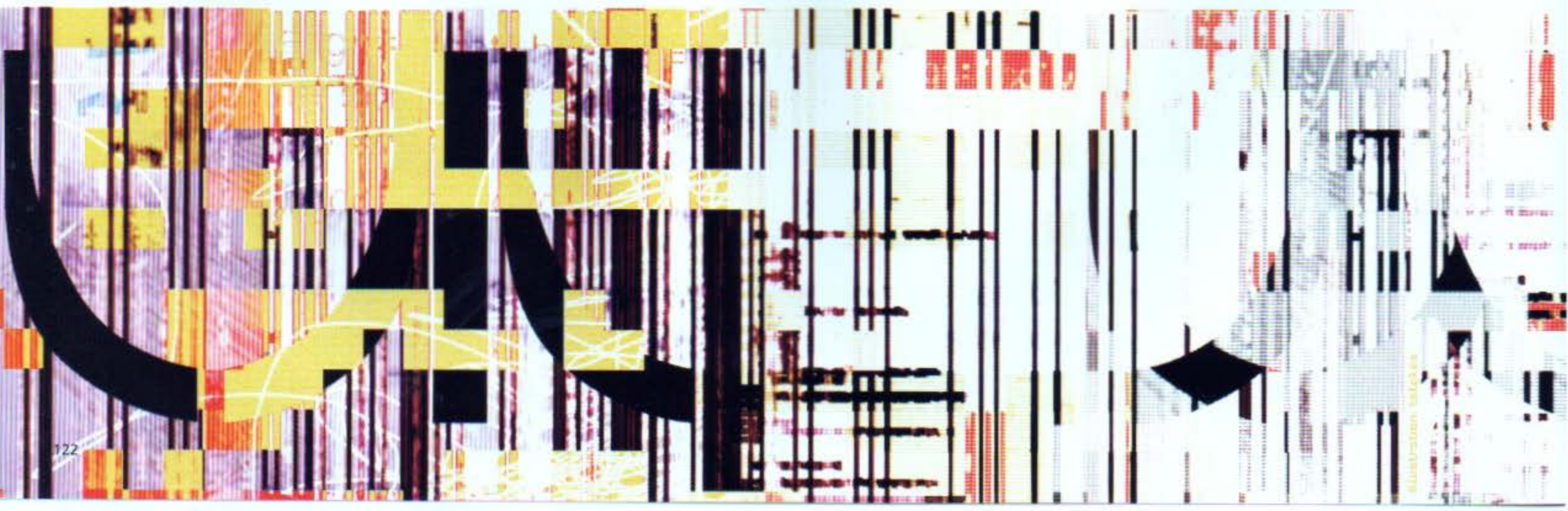
I know that the actual certification levels aren't onerous or even significantly harder to comply with than they were at Atari, only that the timescale is quite a bit different. Knowing this, we can better prepare for the end phase next time and plan on transitioning through it at a gentler, much less stressful pace at the Llamasoft end, to more efficiently match the pace at their end.

Life is a bit more complicated these days, with more complex systems and more languages supported, as well as the necessity to get content ratings in various regions; and so you really do have to factor in a few months extra at the end of your project to fit all this stuff in. Next time we'll know better, having been through it to the end once before, and it should be a more comfortable process for us as a result of that.

Now, however, it's time for a bit of chillout time, maybe a couple of trips away at the weekends, and just some nice unstressed time away from the machines before starting on the next project.

On the game's appointed Wednesday, which will have come and gone by the time you read this, I'll be sitting in front of my Xbox watching the online leaderboards spark into life and start telling the story of how the world is responding to and learning about the *Space Giraffe* experience. That should be really interesting, and I am very much looking forward to it.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose debut Xbox 360 game is reviewed on page 98





BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

FROM OUT OF THE DARKNESS

Many years ago I reviewed LucasArts' *Outlaw*. A long-forgotten wild west-themed firstperson shooter, I thought it was a fine, pioneering game, and gave it a suitably impressive score. Atmospheric and original, its sniper rifle predated *GoldenEye*, and the level set on a moving train would soon become an FPS cliché. Yet every other reviewer on earth seemed to hate it. I was incensed, chiefly because I knew that their reviews would damage sales, and harm the chances of there ever being a sequel. And they did.

And then I got even more pissed off when everything they all seemed to hate about *Outlaw* they loved when it popped up in *GoldenEye*.

I'm not saying I'm right, and they were wrong. Quite the opposite, in fact; I obviously like what I like, and the fact I'm often in the minority suggests that I'm the 'wrong' one. What's more, as I get older I'm becoming more stuck in my ways, and my taste in games is becoming increasingly at odds with the tastes of the masses. I'm increasingly being 'wrong'.

I mean, the games I'm playing most at the moment are as follows: *Sims Pool* on my iPod, Scrabble (on Facebook), and *42 All Time Classics* (chiefly the darts game). Plus, I'm repeatedly making new Miis on the Wii, and playing with the globe in the Wii weather channel. It's hardly *FIFA '07*, or Colin McRae's 'Dirt'.

I'm still buying games, but I'm getting quite narrow-minded about the sorts of games I splash out on. In terms of proper games, realistic military shooters are sort of exclusively my bag these days. Or anything a bit post-apocalyptic (I'm preparing to drop my pants for *Fallout 3*). But, overall, most games that we're told are AAA just get on my titties.

Take *Halo 3* (please!!!!). I couldn't be more underwhelmed at the prospect of its release. I despised *Halo 2* with a fair old passion – any game that seems to emphasise its tedious cutscenes over its gameplay, and tries to convince us it's bigger than it actually is by repeating sections ad infinitum (the gaming equivalent of adding breadcrumbs to a recipe), is going to raise my ire. I've seen nothing about *Halo 3* that suggests it won't just be more of the same, yet the world and his uncle is going cock-a-snooker-loopy over it.

Then there's *The Darkness*. Oh, man... *The Darkness*! It is undoubtedly the worst game – in my humble, independent, profoundly 'wrong' opinion – that I've spent money on in a long, long time. My reviewer's sense was tingling from the first screenshot, but the reviews were 4/5 or higher right across the board. Even my friend Anthony recommend it to me. "Best game this year," he cooed, like a big idiot. But no. You were all wrong. *The Darkness* is awful, and now I feel like the lone boy in the crowd, shouting that he can see the Emperor's balls.

> My taste in games is becoming increasingly at odds with the tastes of the masses. I'm increasingly being 'wrong'

Bear with me for a paragraph or two more, but what is it you all like exactly? *The Darkness* is like every 'dark' videogame cliché rolled into one. When cinema goes dark you get Se7en. When videogames try it you get – whooooo! – *Shadowman*, or *Legacy Of Kain: Soul Reaver*, or *Max Payne* (how the hell can you expect anyone to take your deathly portentious story seriously when you call your main character Max Payne?). It's painfully embarrassing. In fact, I feel embarrassed for not only myself for buying it, but the rest of you for not seeing it. It's terrible that this steaming crapcake of sixth-form poetry-level toss could be held up as a shining example of sophisticated narrative.

It does absolutely nothing new. It just recycles gameplay that was five years out of date five years ago. There's nothing in *The Darkness* I haven't seen dozens of times before. Even the graphics are fairly uninspiring. How many times have we seen a grimy New York setting, or subways, or heavy metal hellscapes? Same old iffy animation. Same old graphical filters and lighting effects. It's one big interactive yawn; just a bog-standard firstperson shooter with a hackneyed plot. Maybe in some weird way I was wrong about *Outlaw*, but with *The Darkness* you're all completely and utterly wrong. I don't care. I know I'm right this time, and you've all been collectively brainwashed, or something.

Aaaaaand... relax. Sorry about that. I just had to get it off my chest. You know how it is.

Anyway, the important point is that, while I may be at odds with what most gamers seem to want, the videogame industry is finally so broad that there really is something for everyone. With the Wii, and brain training games, and mobiles, and iPods and whatnot, the platforms – and the types of games we play on them – are ticking every demographic box. Even mine.

We're not quite there yet, but if you take a step back you can see the industry opening up like a flower (if that's not too poncey a metaphor). It's all about choice, and right now we've got more choice than we've ever had.

Hell, it doesn't even matter that you're all wasting your money on *The Darkness*; I can still trade it in, and come back and play *Tetris* on my mobile, and I'll only have lost about £30.

For pity's sake.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Illustration: tstokes

Inbox



Issue 179

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: My mummy has asked me to buy her *Buzz* and *SingStar*

Seriously. She pops round out of the blue, gives me money and wants me to buy them for her and borrow my PS2. Ever bought a game on behalf of your parents?
Otoko

I've never been asked to get anything for them, but my mum does insist I bring my DS and *Brain Training* whenever I come round.
Pause

My mum wanted *Zoo Keeper* for the DS. That my mum has any interest in videogames at all is messing with my head in a big way.
cecqueue

My mum can't even figure out her mobile phone, so there's not much danger of her getting into games.
Gremill

It was interesting to see the various virtual training methods utilised for army training in **E**178. Videogames as we know them, with face buttons, analogue sticks and presentation designed to entertain, clearly have limited use as a training tool for any real-life activities. It is interesting, however, to see the skills that can be gained from videogames put to other uses.

My house is currently being extended, and my brother and a friend had fun when let loose on a digger for the first time. It was clear that my brother who, unlike our friend, is a gamer, was able to pick up the controls of the digger much sooner. I would argue that his dexterity stems from videogame experience. After all, games constantly ask for the player to control something that is removed from themselves through the controller, and while a 'casual' gamer may take a while to pick up the controls to a new game, an experienced gamer quickly gains a feel for whatever they are controlling and understands the link between themselves and the game.

While being an experienced gamer isn't something I'd suggest putting down as a skill on your CV, it is odd how videogames are so often ignored as being a form of entertainment that is a waste of time, certainly not improving any of your mental abilities. Except *Brain Training*, of course.

Yet *Brain Training*, to me, seems pointless. It doesn't make learning fun; doing sums became boring after a week, and the repetitive nature of its tasks in fact made it dull and unchallenging. I can pick up *Halo* or *GTA* and task myself with a new problem every day for ten minutes (or longer if I want). 'Learning', or rather, worthwhile mental challenges, have always been fun in games. Perhaps the problem is that for the average non-gamer being able to experience the challenge of most videogames is simply too difficult to approach. Not only due to the obscure, indirect method of control, but because every game has a different set of world rules. Gamers have simply become adept at finding and spotting the boundaries. A gamer knows that you won't be able to move that object, or you won't be able to get down to that point, just by looking at it.

Perhaps the problem is that for the average non-gamer being able to experience the challenge of most videogames is simply too difficult to approach

The 'training' levels in games have been getting better – in many ways they are easier to pick up and play than ever – but there's a hugely complicated language of videogames that seems present throughout all games and acts as the real barrier to new players. Perhaps that's why games are so often dismissed as pointless: what was challenging or creative to the player seems trivial and meaningless to an observer because they can't understand the context in which something was achieved in the game.

Sam Wilderspin

Perhaps the trend of making game environments more 'naturalised' with better AI and physics will enable them to be more familiar to people new to games, but it seems that this issue will always be problematic. You've won yourself a DS Lite, on which you can play lots of lovely *Brain Training*.



The best letter wins a DS Lite

Your article on the Army's digital training games [**E**178] correctly observed that military training games are less entertaining. However, it would be incorrect to assume that military procurers successfully select combat fidelity or training effectiveness over entertainment. Research at the RAND Corporation by myself, Matt Lewis, and Dave Oaks indicates that most military training games are not properly evaluated for their training effectiveness. Instead, they are judged mostly for their entertainment value or graphical fidelity. This inattentiveness to training effectiveness allows negative training – trainees learning things they shouldn't, such as foolhardy 'cowboy' tactics because avatars are unrealistically difficult to target or incapacitate. Military training games are probably teaching much that is positive, but in most cases nobody has tested whether the positive justifies the negative.

Bruce Newsome

Call me old fashioned , but when I buy a new piece of electrical equipment I would like some literature to come with it explaining all the

features and how they will contribute to my viewing/listening/life-enhancing experience, and nine times out of ten this is what you get.

Having shelled out the princely sum of £399 for my PS3 pack (Trading Standards would murder them if they dared call it 'value'), I awaited delivery, and on receipt I fished out the instruction book to see what my new piece of kit was capable of, only to be greeted with a flimsy-looking booklet more akin to explaining the ins and outs of an Atari VCS.

Upon delving a little deeper, the actual meat of the manual is only online, so I fired up the broadband and had a nose only to be told I needed to download the software to get my system up to v1.9, which as the file only became available that day crawled to 14 per cent complete after an hour, and was cancelled after a few choice words from myself.

With every console launch the amount of money the manufacturer loses with each unit sold escalates, and now it seems even paper is an expensive commodity that can be done away with to streamline costs, and if you don't have online access the new generation of consoles will leave you far behind.

Paul Creasy

The problem, of course, is that today's consoles – such as your new PS3 – are 'moving targets': thanks to frequent firmware updates, hard-copy instruction booklets can be out of date as soon as they're printed. We do miss a nice geeky manual, too, though.

In your *BioShock* preview you stated: 'Moral decisions aren't new to games, but you won't have experienced a choice as graphic and difficult to resolve as this one'. Um, maybe I read it wrong but it appears that the moral decision is whether or not to kill a little girl.

If this is the toughest dilemma you have ever encountered, **Edge**, then I'm at a loss for words and more than a little disturbed.

Mike Sloane



How would *BioShock* translate to the world of film? Mike Sloane and Henry Winchester question its value as a licensable IP and as a moral framework for your virtual actions

With attention to the game's story, we learn that these are far from being little girls, and in the context of the game world, it is a choice that's fundamental to your character's survival. Games are often about roleplaying, and *BioShock* is a worthy attempt at making you think outside your preconceptions.

There is no way Hollywood would plough hundreds of millions into something like BioShock. The games industry has balls where the film industry has none

In his feature on games and movies (E179), Brick Bardo suggests that games are following where cinema leads. Not really.

This summer we're in the midst of the cinematic silly season: so far we've had 300, Harry Potter, Transformers, Die Hard 4.0, Pirates Of The Caribbean 3 and a new Bourne. All massive films with huge budgets, and every single one of them based on existing franchises, be it books, toys, rides or films. Compare this to the summer movies of 20 or 30 years ago: Star Wars, Indiana Jones, Alien, Ghostbusters, Back To The Future – movies that created franchises.

Now, take a look at the major games we're excited about this year (with a few notable exclusions): *BioShock*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Crysis*, *Heavenly Sword*, *Portal*. All brand new intellectual properties, and all created to be games first and foremost. There is no way Hollywood would plough hundreds of millions into something like *BioShock* – the risk of it failing is too great. The games industry has balls precisely where the film industry has none, and this puts it in a creatively fortunate position.

I'm sure that there are plenty of Hollywood execs sitting around tables with sweaty palms right now, because they know that blockbuster cinema is eventually going to run out of ideas to steal. The fact that a number of lucrative (albeit terrible) Hollywood franchises have been based on games (Resident Evil, Tomb Raider, Mortal Kombat) says it all – Hollywood is following where games lead.

Henry Winchester

Your Time Extend on *Made In Wario* was an excellent article – the *Wario* series deserves a proper critical examination, and it was very well done, except the normally erudite **Edge** neglected to mention *Bishi Bashi Special*, surely a precursor to the bite-sized gaming phenomenon blown apart by Wario. Isn't Konami's effort worthy of even a mention?

Andrew Hodgson

Good point. Consider us duly penitent.

It's a combination of the good and the bad that's lead me to take proverbial pen to proverbial paper.

The bad: another month's magazine where the only decent reviews are for systems I haven't yet bought (or won).

And the good: Microsoft's revealing of the top 20 entrants from their Dream Build Play competition. And, no, I'm not gloating because I'm one of them (alas – I'm not); I'm just happy to see the quality of work being produced outside of the big studios, including some very pleasant originality.

I've been a fan of *Shuggy* since I first played it, for example – and have to applaud Microsoft for giving the community and support to help put games like that into practice, and to then reward them when they do well.

Whilst the XNA forums are lively – and the 'program' even warrants the occasional mention in **Edge** (including last month's announcement of the free TorqueX deal) – I feel that XNA deserves an even wider audience.

My main drive behind this is that I'm sure many non-programming gamers have great ideas for games, but

Continued

Topic: Are you a cheater?

Do you cheat in games? Or use any tricks or trainers to get through were you want to be?
Sucraloser

Only in real life, not in games. That's just wrong.
Hulka T

I had to use Action Replay to finish *Metroid Prime* sadly. Otherwise I don't tend to cheat that much, I just adjust the difficulty back and forth if it's possible.
ppparkinson9

I generally don't use guides, unless I'm totally stuck, or want to make sure I've done everything/collected everything. For example, in a few RPGs I check back in a guide when I complete a section just to make sure there isn't some uber item I missed or something.
Matty J

When playing *Halo 2* on Legendary I find you can often skip some sections by running at full speed past everyone and get onto the next part. Is that cheating?
Wolf at the door

I'm playing through *FFXII* and using guides for the bazaar stuff. You'd never know to save your items if it wasn't for the guides. I don't understand why this information isn't available within the context of the game, it would help deliver a more fulfilling experience without a guilty visit to Gamefaqs every five minutes.
Dogfingers

Speaking of which, you have to use a guide (or some such) in order to find out which chests not to open to get the zodiac spear; something I discovered too late. This should not be acceptable.
the daddy

simply don't know how to put them into practice. And XNA, at last, gives an accessible route in (without forcing developer into developing an off-the-shelf platformer with drag-and-drop graphics and no original features).

But let's not exaggerate – that flexibility does come at a price, namely the ability to program. But in C#, the language XNA uses, the semantics aren't half as bad as they have been before – and nearly all the dirty legwork has been done already. I believe that all it needs is a stronger, more complete introduction and many more people hooked.

Has **Edge** ever considered an article teaching the reader how to program *Pong*? I reckon that could be done in two pages – including ideas that the user could extrapolate from in many a direction. Immediately, the many could be taught how to start programming actual games, and given the tools to develop that knowledge further (with the help of the community). So how about it?
Murray Rogers

We'll start with this month's feature on p70 and go from there, yes?

In a recent interview, Bill Gates openly discussed a Wiimote-style interface called Microsoft Surface. It's set to be an integral part of Microsoft's 'connected entertainment' strategy, to replace a mouse or similar input.

Does this move indirectly admit defeat in the console battle, through emulation of Nintendo and their success? When questioned, Gates replied: "That [Wii] is a 3D positional device, this is video recognition."

Where have I heard this before?' Sony's EyeToy, of course!

Why would Microsoft want to emulate the EyeToy? A low-resolution camera accompanied by a pack of poorly developed minigames. Although this is Microsoft, the camera would be ridiculously and unnecessarily powerful (optical zoom capable of making a reconnaissance mission up your nostril), the accompanying games un-developed but looking fantastic.

I would speculate that, if successful, Surface could be the successor to the 360. Desperation made real or the next 'giant leap' in gaming? Alternatively, Surface and 'connected entertainment' could become the next Zune. Cast your minds back to the fourth quarter of 2006 – Zune was to become the be all and end all of media devices, the one which would topple the iPod. History tells who was the victor.
Conor Lowry

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Topic: Your favourite Wario Ware moment
Further to this month's *Made In Wario* Time Extend, what was your favourite moment from the GBA original? Mine was when in higher levels of the car-jumping game – sometimes the vehicles would jump leaving me often hurtling into them.
fatnicke

The shoot 'em up boss game.
darkglobe80

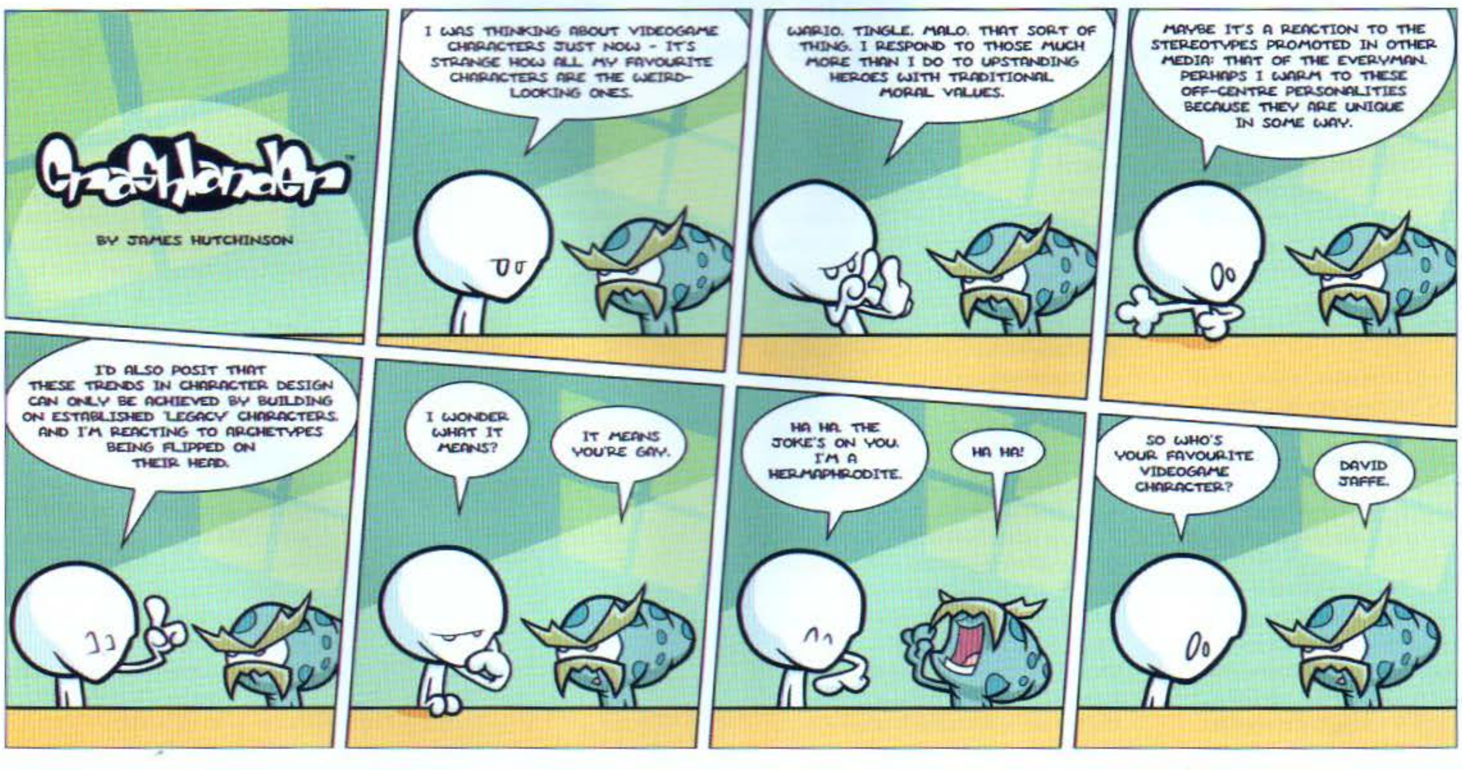
Replaying Scooter Commuter as it got faster and faster.
qazimod

The paper plane minigame.
xybot22

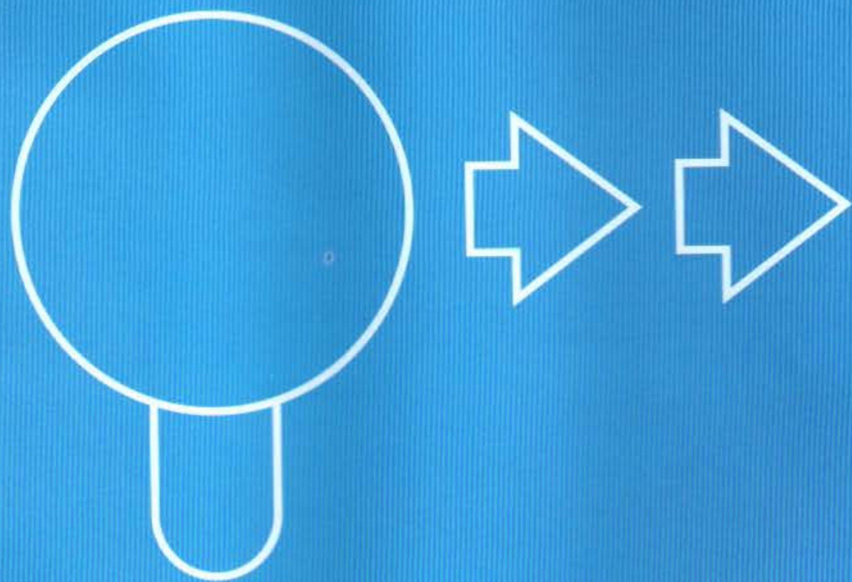
Skateboarding and skipping.
Weadre

Nose picking.
Blue Swirl

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